As World War II generation wanes, Holocaust education grows in importance


That survey found many people don't have an even a basic understanding of how six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust.

That lack of knowledge is especially pronounced in millennials, or people between the ages of 18 and 34.

Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld, CEO of the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills, joined Stateside Wednesday to talk about these recent findings.
Mayerfeld said he wasn’t surprised by the survey because he’s noticed, even among the many civic, church and school groups who visit the museum, many lack background information on the Holocaust.

He’s hopeful, though, that the next generation in Michigan will demonstrate a better understanding. In 2016, Governor Rick Snyder signed a bill at the Holocaust Museum that requires genocide education including the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide during grades 8-12.

“That’s an opportunity,” Mayerfeld said, noting, however, that millennials won’t benefit from this bill.

“Well, okay we want to figure out how to get to those, but how about the next generation as it’s coming up? How do we make sure they learn?”

The survey found 31 percent of all Americans and 41 percent of millennials believe two million or fewer Jews died in the Holocaust. In reality, that number is closer to six million. 41 percent of all Americans and 66 percent of millennials said they didn’t know what Auschwitz was.

Mayerfeld said at the Holocaust Museum, he and his staff emphasize the importance of not only knowing the facts, but also connecting those facts to people and personal testimony from survivors.

On Sunday-Friday, a Holocaust survivor speaks to visitors from 12:15 p.m. to 1:15 p.m. at the Farmington Hills museum.

“What we hope people will come away with when they learn about the Holocaust is to be able to understand individual facts, not just broad-stroked information, but to understand real
information, and often through individual stories, because when you hear the testimony of a survivor you get a different kind of understanding,” Mayerfeld said.

Mayerfeld and the staff of the Holocaust Museum are also working with social studies teachers across the state to strengthen education, and that starts with giving context to the facts they teach.

“Imagine half the people in Michigan, over the course of five years, all of them gone,” Mayerfeld said. “That’s a context. That gives you some understanding of how big a number it is.”

Earlier this year, the Anti-Defamation League released its annual audit of anti-Semitic incidents, and recorded just under 2,000 of those incidents in 2017. The year before it was just under 1,300, a jump of 57 percent.

Mayerfeld attributes this statistic to the fact that people today are increasingly disconnected to the history and people who lived through the Holocaust.

“We’re getting further and further away from people who felt they had a direct connection to what happened during World War II, and it makes it much easier for people to sort of start borrowing those biases back for their own purposes.”

As the population of Holocaust survivors declines, Mayerfeld says he is tasked with re-creating the empathy that first-hand survivor testimony provides.

“You can’t replace it, but what you can do is you can identify what it brings to the table,” he said. “And that sense of empathy is what we’re working on creating systems to be able to continue to provide.”