

Hometown Life

FARMINGTON HILLS LIFE

Michigan's Zekelman Holocaust Center shows that anti-Semitism isn't always far from home



Shelby Tankersley

Hometownlife.com

Published 10:24 a.m. ET May 13, 2022

"We don't tell people what to think, we tell them to think."

A trip through the Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills is sobering, to put it lightly. The center doesn't mince words and presents visitors with information and imagery that are hard to confront. Many student groups who visit also hear about the difficult realities of the Holocaust from a survivor who now lives in the area.

But the tours are about more than education. They're about helping people be better citizens and neighbors.

"We really believe that teaching the lessons of the Holocaust can empower students – empower everybody, really – to think about the choices they have in front of them and to be active participants in their democracy," said Ruth Bergman, the center's director of education.

Roughly 35,000 students plus another 30,000 people in adult groups or in walk-in visits go through the center, near the corner of 12 Mile and Orchard Lake roads, every year. It's the only Holocaust museum in Michigan.

Though the Holocaust ended more than 75 years ago, the staff and volunteer docents at the Holocaust Center believe the things that helped cause it, like hatred, misinformation and discrimination, are still prevalent today. Knowing how to spot misinformation is one of the major lessons of a tour.

"The Holocaust is relevant because we see the dangers of ideology that becomes state policy and we see people stand by and not take action," Bergman said. "There's the danger of

propaganda and looking to blame one group for all the ills of society.

"The things that happened in the Holocaust happened on a huge scale and they happened over 12 years. But these are, unfortunately, timeless things that we need to be able to recognize."

Local Holocaust survivors: 75 years after Auschwitz liberation, survivors revisit 'sheer hell' in concentration camps

Library legal issues: Will Garden City Library become homeless? Lawsuits, tensions with city hint at yes

Tough love, literally: Kronk Gym's boxing mom learned the sport to help her sons chase their dreams

What the Holocaust meant for Michigan is also a big focus. Visitors can see newspaper clippings of Detroit-area newspapers from the time and some of the artifacts, like a Bergen-Belsen concentration camp uniform, belonged to people who settled in metro Detroit after the war. There's also local examples of anti-Semitism, like Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin, who both used media to push anti-Semitic views, that people can view.

"It's a huge subject and it can be overwhelming," Bergman said. "The goal really is to make it personal. We're not just talking about dates and places and numbers, but to really see the impact the Holocaust had on individuals."

Despite all of the local artifacts, it doesn't get more personal than the first-hand experiences of local Holocaust survivors, or the recounting of those stories by their children. Those lectures, normally held at the end of a group tour, can stick with people for years.

"You're talking to someone who is your next door neighbor or who goes to the same grocery store as you," Bergman said. "They may have come here and went to the same high school your grandparents went to. It helps us see the people as real people and not just this label of 'victim.'"

The center deals with its share of Holocaust deniers, which Bergman says comes with the territory, but it's also seen generous financial support from the community and is championed by the teachers who find it important to bring their students. In a post-2020 world, the center has also seen uptick in its free online resources.

People in the metro Detroit area can visit the center six days a week — it's closed on Saturday. Adult tickets cost \$8 and students pay \$5.

*Contact reporter Shelby Tankersley at stankersle@hometownlife.com or 248-305-0448.
Follow her on Twitter @shelby_tankk.*