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The Importance of Inclusive Holocaust Education

By Ashley Zlatopolsky - 06/12/2023 7:20 PM



Sen. Gary Peters and Sec. of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas toured the Zekelman Holocaust Center in March 2022.

Holocaust educator Katie Chaka Parks strives to make the lessons of the Holocaust relevant for everyone.

The Zekelman Holocaust Center manager of adult education Katie Chaka Parks, 33, believes people from all walks of life, regardless of age, background or religion, should learn the history of the Holocaust and how it continues to impact today's world.

“It’s extremely important for communities to have allies,” she says, “and it’s so important for people who are not Jewish to also take on the history of the Holocaust to make sure that everybody understands the history and its ramifications today.”



Katie Chaka Parks

Parks serves as an important example. While she comes from a Greek Orthodox community, she is deeply committed to Holocaust education.

She also addresses the experiences of women during the Holocaust and the inclusion and exclusion of women’s narratives within museum exhibits across the United States as her dissertation research as a Ph.D. candidate in European History at Wayne State University, which she plans to defend in the fall.

“I’m not Jewish, which for some people is confusing why I suppose I care so much,” she says. “It’s confusing to me why that’s confusing.”

A Shared History

Parks says it’s easy to forget that many different groups were involved in perpetuating the Holocaust. “It’s truly all of our history,” she says. “Unfortunately, hate is universal, and that’s a big thing that drives my motivation in working here.”

In 2017, Parks, an Oakland Township resident and mother of two, started her journey at the Zekelman Holocaust Center as a volunteer docent. “I was getting my undergrad and masters and, of course, I was very interested in this history,” she says.

In fact, Parks was persistent. She continued to call the center until a volunteer position opened up for her.

After four years of volunteering, she joined the center on staff part-time in 2021 to teach virtually during the pandemic when Michigan still had COVID-19 restrictions. Eventually, she transitioned into a full-time role as manager of adult education.



Chaka Parks guides a tour for local students.

“You certainly can’t walk through the doors and forget that you’re doing important work,” Parks says. “It can be a Monday and you can be tired, yet you walk through the doors and realize that work that we do here is so critical, which fuels my passion for this.”

As manager of adult education, Parks oversees the education for any civic, fraternal, religious groups, political figures, military or law enforcement that visit the building.

“It’s a very large umbrella, but I think that’s really wonderful because we are really focused on student groups here at the museum,” she says.

“Students will always be our bread and butter, and we absolutely need to educate them as the future, but the new phase the museum is moving into is a more holistic view of Holocaust education.”

This includes identifying ways to educate entire communities about the Holocaust, and figuring out how that can translate to creating safe communities for all today.

Parks is also part of the team writing content for new exhibits and the massive remodel that the center is undertaking, which is expected to continue through early next year.

Uncovering Stories

As a longtime history fan, Parks has always held a deep interest in people.

“I like people’s stories,” she says. “I like learning about individual people and how they fit into the broader network of history.”

This made pursuing history studies as her career an easy choice. While “any self-respecting history fan becomes a professor,” she explains, Parks quickly learned during undergrad that history is only important when it’s not “kept in the ivory tower.”

“You can write articles, research and lecture, which are very important and very necessary to the field, yet if nobody hears them, is that important?” Parks questions.

“For me, taking that academic history and moving it into a sphere that people of all different socioeconomic backgrounds, interests and walks of life can actually learn about was the most rewarding.”



Chaka Parks presents a program on women in the Holocaust.

While Parks, who has taught courses for the History Department and Gender, Sexuality and Women Studies Program at Wayne State University, always wants to keep a foot in academia, educating a broader audience is what ultimately drives her.

Now, Parks is committed to her role as manager of adult education at the Zekelman Holocaust Center and identifying ways to integrate told and untold women's stories.

"You want people to be able to see themselves in this history and learn and care," she says. "If a young girl walks through an exhibit and they don't see themselves as a victim or a survivor, or even a perpetrator or collaborator, how do you do that?"

The key, Parks explains, is creating a Holocaust narrative that includes all voices.

“People experienced it in so many different ways,” she says. “Gender was one really big way that people experienced the Holocaust. We cannot ignore that anymore.”

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