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Holocaust history brings rural educators to tears

July 17, 2008
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“I want to apologize for being ignorant of your story,” said Rwanda native Gatsinzi Basaninyenzi, who teaches English in Huntsville, Ala. “The genocide in Rwanda lasted 100 days, yours took six years. I have been very ignorant.”

By Kate McNeil

There are no Jews where Danielle Bethune comes from. The high school teacher lives in a town of 372 people, including 95 high schoolers, in the middle of Nebraska.

“It’s not a point of prejudice, our kids just don’t know [Judaism],” Ms. Bethune said.

She tries to teach the Holocaust but feels like she comes up short. “There’s no way I can cover it all, like, here, this is Judaism in a box.”

Enter Riverdale resident Sondra Perl, an English professor at Lehman College for more than 30 years and author of *On Austrian Soil: Teaching Those I Was Taught to Hate*, a memoir of her experiences working with Austrian teachers who were descendants of Nazis.

Although quick to recognize the horror of the Holocaust, Ms. Perl hopes to keep it alive in classrooms, especially those in rural America.

“Students, no matter where they live, begin to see the implications for their own lives when they learn about the dangerous potential of intolerance and racism,” she said.

A consummate teacher, Ms. Perl created the Holocaust Educators Network three years ago and fashioned a yearly seminar for rural teachers like Ms. Bethune.

“Urban institutions are so well funded,” she added. “We want to bring knowledge to people that wouldn’t normally get it.”

On July 7 Ms. Bethune and 20 other teachers arrived in New York to immerse themselves in a 10-day seminar on Holocaust history.

An Upper East Side townhouse, the home of the late Olga Lengyl, a Holocaust survivor, is serving as home base for the teachers, who hail from 11 different states, many in the South.

Ms. Lengyl’s home has been remodeled and renamed the Memorial Library, which supports education aimed at preventing genocides.

The goal is to help teachers develop a comprehensive curriculum to bring back to their classrooms. Their schedule is packed with activities including tours of the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the Tenement Museum, but for most teachers, inspiration came from meeting Holocaust survivors like Gisela Glaser, a native of Poland living in the Pelham section of the Bronx.

Meeting survivors, Ms. Perl said, the teachers “feel a sacred trust, their duty to teach their students about the Holocaust.”

Speaking on July 10, Ms. Glaser told her unimaginable story of survival.

“Thank you for being interested in this terrible subject,” she started.

Ms. Glaser lost her entire family before she was imprisoned in a concentration camp. Perhaps sadder, she

feels the world has not met its promise of “never again,” referring to genocides in Rwanda and Darfur.

She told stories of hunger and humiliation. She told stories of desperation and dread.

“We always thought it can’t get worse but everyday it got worse,” she said.

Passing around her school picture, Ms. Glaser pointed out four faces that lived to tell the horrors of the Holocaust.

The imagery she shared — flakes of flesh resembling butterflies flying out of chimneys at Auschwitz, children lured by lullabies only to be murdered, drinking urine to stay hydrated — was nearly impossible for some teachers to swallow. Instead, they cried.

Amazingly, Ms. Glaser also made them laugh: “Some of you have never met a Jew and to think I don’t have horns!”

“To be in a room with a survivor,” Ms. Bethune said, pausing, “I have goosebumps right now. When I came, I thought, I teach the Holocaust. No, no I don’t.”

“I want to apologize for being ignorant of your story,” said Rwanda native Gatsinzi Basaninyenzi, who teaches English in Huntsville, Ala. “The genocide in Rwanda lasted 100 days, yours took six years. I have been very ignorant. I did not know anything and I just want to apologize.”

Thomas Maerke, a second-year English teacher in Springfield, Mo. said he hopes to expand his Holocaust curriculum beyond The Diary of Anne Frank.

“The Holocaust was just in history books for me,” said Dr. Patricia Ackerman, from Kansas State University. “To sit here with someone who survived it, it brings it to life. It’s almost overwhelming, to see the tattoo on her arm.”

“The only thing I can do is to remember and share that knowledge with my students,” said Sue Hopkins from Kelliher, Minn.

“The scariest thing is that these survivors will be gone soon,” said Southeastern Louisiana University professor Beth Calloway. “It’s a horrible legacy, to pass the torch from one generation of survivors to the next. As long as two people from a different generation can sit in the same room it will never end. It’s so amazing we can be so blind. But it’s not blind, it’s choosing not to see.”

For Ms. Perl, the seminar has become a source of meaning in her life: “I’ve always been a teacher, who I am is expressed best in a classroom. To see people coming to grips with this atrocity, it is truly a privilege.”

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News content published by The Riverdale Press.
Internet Edition managed using First Day Story.
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