

Holocaust education in high school is an extra-curricular affair

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Jewish teens in WWII. From a [holocaust education package](#) from the US.

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On Tuesday afternoons shortly after three, when most students are shuffling to their lockers, loading their backpacks and heading out the doors of Prince Andrew High School in Dartmouth, a group stays behind. Today, there are 12 of them; 11 girls and one guy – they’re short a few.

They meet to learn about the Holocaust – from historical details, to ethical implications and group discussion. It’s called the Asper club, a program offered through the [Asper Foundation](#), an organization dedicated to Holocaust education and human rights.

Though the subject is included to an extent in history curricula, the classes “didn’t go into ethics,” says 17-year-old Alex Wilson, in Grade 12. “It’s not something we talked about.”

But history teacher Anne McLeod incorporates ethical discussion into her lesson plans for the Asper club. She asks the class hypothetical questions like: “What would you have done if a Jew came knocking at your door?” It’s the same question she herself was asked at [Yad Vashem](#) in Israel, a global centre for Holocaust education and remembrance – one of the places she’s visited to further her own knowledge. This spring, her students will have their own opportunity when they travel to Washington D.C. to visit sites including the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#), the culmination of their year with the Asper club.

Today, the students are learning about Auschwitz and Birkenau, death camps where Jews, as well as other persecuted groups, were murdered. By including photos she took during her visit to the camps, she engages students by sharing her reaction to these historical landmarks.

McLeod sits perched on a desk at the front of the class, narrating her Power Point slides. The students sit silently. When she comes across a black and white photo of three posts that once held up an electric fence – wires long gone – surrounding one of the camps, she pauses. “If they could speak, what would they say?”

These silent witnesses will remain speechless, but survivor stories can live on.

“It’s very important to the survivors that we remember what happened,” she tells her students, after she recounts the story of a married couple, both Holocaust survivors, whom she met in Israel.

Remembering these stories is only part of it. To take this education beyond the school the students volunteer for a minimum of 16 hours over the year. Their placement has to help people – whether it’s at the hospital or at the food bank. It might seem like a bit of a stretch for a club founded on Holocaust education, but the tenets are simple: to oppose the cycle of hatred, which takes the incarnations of events as horrific as genocide and as small-scale as schoolyard bullying, and to contribute positive action in the world by helping people in the community.

The Asper club is more than a lesson about a dark hour in world history. It’s the “only place for discussion of human rights,” says 17-year-old Grade 12 student Haley DiPersio.

A discussion that’s not held in regular classes, but that these students crave.

“I think people should really learn about it in class,” says Bryna Overy, a 17-year-old Grade 11 student. By studying details and individual stories, the students can “feel the emotions of the people,” says Overy, who says she had an interest in the Holocaust and had read literature on the subject in her spare time. “By feeling you learn, ‘don’t do it.’ It’s kind of a way to prevent more violence.”

Aleena Shaukat, 17 and in Grade 12, echoes this sentiment. “It really makes me think when you make fun of someone, they could take it to heart.”

“There are so many comments that people make that are bad,” says Overy. Like, “you’re such a Jew”: a slur alluding to a derogatory stereotype she hears classmates say. Words that can carry injury and unpredictable repercussions.