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Students learn lessons from horrors of Holocaust

Asper Foundation program brings scores of young Canadians to Washington museum

BY SHELDON ALBERTS

WASHINGTON

Growing up in Calgary, 14-year-old Aviva Fialkow was only vaguely aware of her grandparents' history as Holocaust survivors.

From time to time, she noticed her grandmother Faye would stuff food in her pocket and rush to complete her to-do list. They were quirky, but unexplained, mannerisms.

It was only as Aviva got older that she learned her grandmother's behaviour stemmed from a life lived in fear of not knowing when her next meal would come, or if she'd be alive to do the things she wanted.

Aviva's grandmother, who survived a Nazi concentration camp in Poland, lost five of eight family members in the Holocaust.

"My grandma was a survivor and she wouldn't even talk about it because she was so scared," Aviva, a Grade 9 student at Calgary's John Ware Junior High School, said Monday as she toured the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. "She lost her entire family."

Aviva recalled her grandmother as she and about 200 visiting Canadian teens spent several hours viewing the museum exhibits.

The group's trip to the U.S. capital marked the capstone of 18 hours of study in The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, which was launched in 1997 by the late Israel Asper as a way to use history to teach Canadian students about tolerance.

Inside, the students saw a collection of personal effects from Holocaust victims — from family photographs to stacks of shoes the Nazis confiscated from victims before sending them into the gas chambers.

Keegan Yang, a 14-year-old student from Marshall McLuhan Catholic Secondary School in Toronto, said he became "really angry" walking

through the museum as he wondered "how could someone do these things to other human beings."

The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program has brought more than 8,200 students from 110 Canadian cities to the U.S. capital in recent years.

The program is aimed both at teaching the history of the Holocaust, and using it to urge students to do their part to guard against history repeating itself — as has happened in modern-day genocides that have occurred in places as far flung as Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

"Things that happened in history could also happen now," said Andreea Timis, 14, a Grade 9 student from Marshall McLuhan. "To think that something like that could happen right now is very frightening."

Indeed, this year's visit by Canadian students follows a very recent horror at the Holocaust museum.

Last June, an elderly white supremacist burst into the museum and killed a guard. James von Brunn, an 88-year-old Holocaust denier, had targeted the museum on a suicide mission that authorities said was aimed at sending a message to the Jewish community. He died in January before going to trial.

Jeff Morry, senior program manager with the Asper Foundation, said the shooting underscores the "dangers of hatred" and the need for places like the Holocaust museum, which reaffirm the importance of speaking out against human rights abuses and hatred.

This year, about 1,200 students from 19 schools across Canada are taking part in the Asper Foundation program. It formed the starting point for the \$100-million Canadian Museum of Human Rights, which is under construction in Winnipeg and will open in 2012.

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