

May 12, 2005  
33 Year, 5765

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# Asper Foundation program draws participants from across Canada

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WINNIPEG — Ethan Pollock says his visit to Washington, D.C., in mid-April was one of the most enjoyable experiences of his life, and the one that had the greatest impression on him.

The Grade 9 St. John's-Ravenscourt School student was part of a group of 114 Winnipeg high school students, Jewish and non-Jewish, who visited the American capital under the auspices of the Asper Foundation's human rights and Holocaust studies program.

The Grade 9 students and their chaperones took in the Smithsonian museum and other Washington sites. But the highlight, as always, was the Holocaust Memorial Museum.

"It was an excellent experience," Joseph Wolinsky High School student Eli Cristante told an audience on April 26, just prior to a Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra performance commemorating the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. "The Holocaust museum is beyond the concept of a museum. It combines memory with a sense of peace. It causes you to reflect deeply on what went on. We were standing with visitors from Japan and Nigeria. I would encourage everyone to go."

"It was an amazingly powerful four days," says Rene Kaplan, a co-ordinator of the Winnipeg part of what has become a national program. "It's a life-changing experience."

Jeff Morry, the senior program manager for the Asper Foundation's human rights and Holocaust studies program, reports that this year's overall program is expected to have more than 800 participants in total from approximately 27 communities in nine provinces. There will be five separate trips to Washington. The next one, scheduled for May 15 to 18, will have about 330 participants from 14 communities in eight provinces. During this trip, joining Congressman Tom Lantos in speaking to the students at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum will be Frank McKenna, Canada's ambassador to the United States.

Morry notes that more than one-quarter of participants in the program this year are non-Jewish.

"It is amazing how much support we are getting across the country," he says. "There is, for example, a teacher in St. John's, Nfld., who is bringing a group of 35 students on the May trip. It's the first group we have joining us from Newfoundland. And we are in negotiations with an Islamic school in Toronto."

Launched in 1997, the Asper Foundation program was conceived by the late Israel Asper. Its objectives are to promote tolerance and sensitize Canadian high school students to the

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consequences of racism through a specially designed education program. Initially, the Asper Foundation restricted the program to Grade 8 students at Winnipeg's Jewish Joseph Wolinsky Collegiate, part of the Gray Academy.

It was then opened up to Jewish Grade 9 students in Winnipeg's public school system and then all Grade 9 students who showed an interest. The most recent group from Winnipeg included students from 15 high schools, including the Springs Christian Academy.

In 2000, for the first time, the program became a national initiative and received the 2004 Human Rights Award from the Canadian Human Rights Commission. To date, over 4,500 students and chaperones of many faiths and backgrounds in 49 cities in nine provinces have participated.

Prior to the trip to Washington, all students are required to take an 18-hour education program – or its equivalent – on human rights and the Holocaust, with an added emphasis on American history and the civil rights movement. The curriculum for the educational component of the program was developed by Holocaust and human rights educators for the Asper Foundation.

After the trip to Washington, where the students also visit other monuments relating to freedom, the students are required to volunteer in their communities.

The last component of the program, Morry says, is an evening graduation ceremony held to present a Memorandum for Personal Responsibility to each student. The document was commissioned by the Asper Foundation for this program and written by Israel Asper.

The memorandum aims to provide the students with a sense of the importance of their participation in the program and to remind them that they have a personal responsibility for the world community.

“The ceremony is a wonderful way to provide the students with closure to the formal part of the program as well as the sense that they are now beginning a new life of greater understanding and tolerance,” Morry says.

He adds that the value of the program is reflected in the support it receives across the country from private and public foundations, organizations and individuals. Another measure of the program's worth is the fact that in Washington, D.C., for several years, Congressman Tom Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor ever elected to the U.S. Congress, has met with and spoken to participants about the importance of understanding and protecting human rights.

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