

Profound lessons learned outside classroom

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The Minivan Years

In the end, it was the mountains of empty shoes that brought home the horror of the Holocaust for Luke.

He and more than 50 students from his Catholic high school are just home from an extraordinary experience, one that likely will change some lives.

The group had the opportunity to take part in the Asper Foundation's Holocaust and human rights program, an exercise that included 18 hours of preparatory classes followed by a visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Follow-up includes community service linked to the experience.

Having attended meetings before the trip, I knew it would be a powerful experience, but I had no idea just how valuable — or difficult — it would be.

It was a very subdued Luke who arrived home. Partly, of course, his demeanour was the result of the overnight bus trip down, a busy schedule while in Washington and the excitement of being away with a gang of friends. But there was a look in his eye that spoke to the impact of his experience.

I had been worried, given that he was travelling with high school students, there was a risk some might not demonstrate the respect required, but he spoke of the silence as everyone toured the memorial.

The impact was obvious, he said, because no one uttered a word when some students started to cry at the exhibits they saw. Everyone, he said, simply carried on in silence.

Luke talked of standing in one of the rail cars that had transported Jews to the death camps, of seeing the striped camp uniforms that had been worn by inmates and trying to imagine the horror of the experience.

He spoke of the Nazis' systematic murder of homosexuals and people with special needs and mentioned people he knew who would have been vulnerable.

And then he mentioned the shoes. A friend of mine who's a minister had expressed the same shock at seeing piles and piles of empty shoes, silent wit-

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Holocaust museum leaves lasting impact

► Holocaust From E1

ness to the murder of their owners, so I had known it was a powerful sight.

But it was those shoes — and photographs of young girls, their heads shorn — that personalized the Holocaust for Luke because they made him think of his sisters. As the children of a Jewish father, he pointed out, they, too, might have been victims.

Details of the trip continue to emerge and what they reveal is that the boisterous kids who are Luke's friends were profoundly moved by the experience. At an age when most boys would do almost anything rather than talk about their feelings, they are sharing their understanding of their experience.

That, with hope, will be the beginning. Speakers both here and in Washington stressed to the students the importance of hearing the story of the Holocaust because, of course, by the time Luke and his tripmates are parents, there will be few witnesses left.

One speaker in Toronto explained that tolerance is not enough. Tolerance, he told them, means putting up with something or someone, and what they should be aiming for, he said, was acceptance.

For Luke, that brought to mind someone he knows who delights in offensive jokes and observations. While Luke has always known it was wrong, he now says he's going to speak up.

If that's where the trip ended it would be more than enough. But Luke and many of his friends came home wearing green versions of the rubber bracelets so popular today with fundraising and awareness campaigns.

Stamped on the bracelet is the message, "Save Darfur."

Clearly, the trip was a success because students were able to take the injustice of the Holocaust and apply it to the modern world. When the lesson of the death camps is taught, it's not just about giving students a history lesson; it's also a cautionary tale, a warning to keep young eyes open to the potential for any human rights abuse.

I have faith in Luke and his classmates that some day, some of them will be attempting to solve world problems.

Taking on big issues, however, begins with small steps. For now I'm happy one of the lessons learned on the trip includes increased sensitivity to others. Living in the GTA, one of the most multicultural corners of the world, the reality is our children will go to school with students of different backgrounds, live beside families of different backgrounds, work alongside colleagues of different backgrounds and, like Luke's parents, perhaps marry people of different backgrounds.

We place so much emphasis on marks and academics these days we run the danger that school will become a training ground for the self-absorbed, that going to school will become strictly about getting ahead and getting a job, all the while losing sight of the very people beside us.

Sometimes, however, the most important lessons learned in school will never be measured by a report card.

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1945 file photograph shows some of the prisoners who survived Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp in Oswiecim, Poland.