

# The Guardian THIS WEEK

in the Lifestyle Section

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# Life lessons from the past

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Students at Birchwood intermediate school learn about tolerance and acceptance and the tragic results of racism following an unforgettable visit to the Holocaust Museum.

BY CAITLIN MCINTYRE  
THE GUARDIAN

Fourteen-year-old Sean White never anticipated the harrowing emotional impact that his trip to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., would have on him.

It sort of hit him all at once. On the class trip, he and his peers touched one of the bunk beds that was used by Jewish prisoners in the Auschwitz concentration camp. He felt a cold shiver as he imagined the Holocaust victims cramped into the tiny bed, just hoping they'd make it through the night.

It hit him as he walked down the museum's long halls and saw all of the shoes, both big and small, lined in cases on the walls. Each pair represented a Jewish person who died during the Holocaust.

Suddenly, it became much more than just another field trip.

"When we were there, I was speechless. Often, I just stood there and I found myself getting behind the group because I was just staring at one object, the shoes or the bed," he said. "And I stood there for five minutes or something just thinking."

Sean was one of 17 Grade 9 Birchwood intermediate school students who, with library resource teacher JoAnne White (no relation), visited the Holocaust Museum for a class field trip in late May.

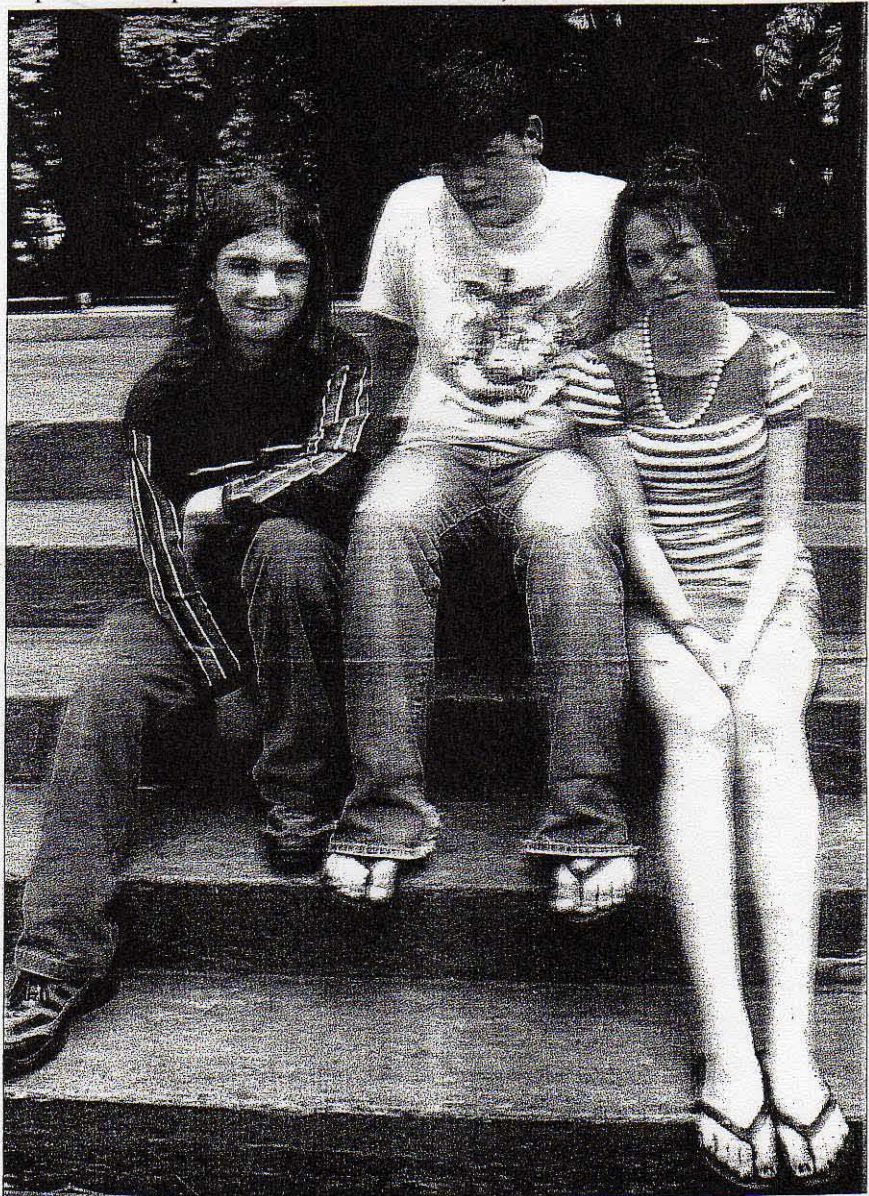
The Charlottetown school is the first in the province to participate in the Asper Foundation Human Rights Holocaust Studies Program.

As part of the program, the students participated in 18 hours of education sessions about the Holocaust as well as 16 hours of community service prior to their Washington trip. The goal of the program is to promote tolerance and acceptance, and to help students understand how racism and discrimination exist in society.

The hope is that by learning about the horrors of the Holocaust, they will realize every person, regardless of religion or race, has the same basic human rights.

On Wednesday, Sean said the experience helped him understand what constitutes real hatred. This class trip had a profound impact on his life because the experience taught him the importance and necessity of human rights, he said.

"Ever since I've gotten back, there's been a total change in my life," Sean, a York resident, said. "Any time I hear someone saying or see some-



GUARDIAN PHOTO BY CAITLIN MCINTYRE

Birchwood intermediate students Sean White, 14, Ryan Rioux, 15, and 16-year-old Rachel Warren recently visited the Holocaust Museum in

Washington District. The field trip was part of the Asper Foundation Human Rights Holocaust Studies Program.

## A new perspective

Here are the names of the students who participated in the Human Rights and Holocaust Studies program. Thomas Phillis wasn't able to go on the trip, but he did take part in the volunteer work and educational sessions. Valerie Boswall, Katie Corrigan, Ashley Deighan, Samantha Foster, Catherine Fournier, Jacinta MacDonald, Brenna MacInnis, Samantha MacInnis, Catherineann Martin, Chelsea McGrath, Thomas Phillis, Ryan Rioux, Keshia Ross, Rebecca Sullivan, Emil Talen, Cearagh Vessey, Rachel Warren and Sean White.

one doing anything that isn't morally right, I know now

more than ever." That's exactly the kind of reaction JoAnne White was looking for from her students. White, who organized the trip, said that by learning about the Holocaust in a hands-on way, the students comprehend the horrors of that tragic event. And in turn, they realize that everyone deserves equal treatment and dignity. White saw first-hand an emotional growth among all her students. They began studying the Holocaust with their educational sessions, which were held in two-hour stints after school to prepare them for what they would encounter at the museum.

But it was during that class trip when her students became especially invested in the project. She said she noticed how much they wanted to learn and to be educated. "We've done something that has made a difference with these kids; we've done something that has enhanced their level of understanding and will make them better citizens of our community in the end," White said. "I believe they will go on to practise a higher level of tolerance and acceptance of other people after this, and what better goal can we have as educators than to make that kind of difference in somebody's life?"

At the museum, the students listened to tape recordings of Holocaust survivors. Each survivor tells his or her tale of courage and loss while living in concentration camps, as pictures of that person flashes on a screen. They also saw one of the railway cars that brought thousands of Jewish prisoners to camps where they were tortured and killed. And in one room of the museum, the walls are blanketed with pictures of Holocaust victims. Ryan Rioux was surprised by how misinformed he was about the Holocaust. In fact, before taking part in the

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school project, the 15-year-old Stratford native thought he knew all there was to know about that tragic event.

"I thought I knew everything, but I knew absolutely nothing," he said.

At first, Ryan said he only got involved in the project because he wanted to take part in an extracurricular activity and this seemed interesting enough. But as he learned more about the Holocaust and about intolerance, it became especially important to him. So much so, in fact, that it

helped to change his perspective on human rights issues, he said.

After touring the museum, Ryan lit a candle in honour of the Holocaust victims, which was something he found particularly jarring. I didn't cry, but there were lots of times I was fighting it back," he said.

Meanwhile, 16-year-old Rachel Warren wasn't even sure what the Holocaust was before participating in the school project.

"I was like, what is the Holocaust? It didn't clue in to me at all."

However, after touring the Holocaust Museum and spending countless hours learning about the pain and sacrifices of the victims, she became very aware. It was an

experience Warren said she'll never forget.

"It really changed my mind (about school). For once, I was actually interested in something during school," she joked.

Reg MacInnis, who was a chaperone on the field trip, said while there's no question many of the kids learned invaluable lessons; others will not realize the importance of the project until they're older.

Nonetheless, for those who were more emotionally engaged, the immediate impact the experience had on them was obvious, he said.

Birchwood will continue to educate students about human rights and present education in an innovative way, said school principal Doug Currie. The success of this program proves Birchwood is making positive inroads in enhancing

students' awareness and appreciation of basic rights and the need for tolerance, he said.