

Home

News

Viewpoint

Sports

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Hamilton students pledge action after Holocaust museum trip

Abigail Cukier, and Joshelin Horn, Stoney Creek

(Jun 8, 2007)

The co-founder of The Asper Foundation says its Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program is about transformation.

"Young people learn about the past in such a compelling manner that they are motivated to make positive changes in their own schools and communities," said Babs Asper. "They emerge from the program with enlightened attitudes and a keen sense of their responsibilities as citizens of the world."

It seems the program has in fact changed Hamilton students.

"When you learn about the Holocaust in school, when you are reading it in textbooks, you don't care as much, because it doesn't seem real. When you go to the museum you see it first hand, the artifacts, the stories, the pictures, the exhibits, they all made the Holocaust a tangible reality," said Sonya Benjamin, one of 58 Hamilton students who graduated from the program May 27 after a trip to the US Memorial



SUBMITTED PHOTO

David Asper, Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, and Hamilton Mayor Fred Eisenberger participated in the program's graduation last month.

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Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.

Since the trip, Sonya, a Sir John A. Macdonald secondary school student, has been invited to speak at a community event and plans to join a student organization about the Holocaust in university.

"We were told we have the power to change the future and that meant a lot. This was the most amazing experience in my life. It made the Holocaust a reality, instead of just reading about it."

From May 6 to May 9, Hamilton sent students to Washington from the public and Catholic school boards, Hillfield Strathallan College, George Vanier, Appleby College and Brantford Collegiate who participated in pre-trip workshops on human rights, the Holocaust and the civil rights movement. They had to write an essay explaining why they wanted to participate in the program and are required to volunteer on community projects.

Since 1997, The Asper Foundation, in partnership with community organizations, has funded nearly 5,000 participants in 82 communities.

Hamilton students received a Memorandum for Personal Responsibility at a graduation attended by David Asper and Mayor Fred Eisenberger May 27.

"It was emotional from beginning to end to hear the students speak about their experiences," said Madeleine Levy, Hamilton chair, Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program. "At the beginning they were passive listeners, now they are active leaders."

"Hamilton is a special place with special people. I couldn't be more proud of our students or our community."

Magenta Chernetz-Taha, a special education resource teacher at Cardinal Newman Catholic Secondary School in Stoney Creek, helps run the school board's diversity committee and traveled to Jerusalem two years ago for training in teaching about the Holocaust.

She said what students witness in the museum stays with them.

For many, the mound of 4,000 shoes left behind at Majdanek concentration camp was most poignant. For others, it was imagining being inside a rail boxcar.

The Nazis used the boxcars to transport Jews and other prisoners to concentration camps. At times, more than 100 people were squeezed into the car facing hunger and thirst, overcrowding and horrible sanitation. The trains sometimes halted for hours or days along the way. Many, especially the elderly and children, died during the journey.

"This is the next generation, it is important to let them know what's going on out there. With Darfur, it is still happening," Ms. Chernetz-Taha said. "They can learn they can make a difference, they can be a voice for anybody experiencing injustice or persecution."

Sir John A. Macdonald student Claudio Raposo plans to make that his mission.

"I was overwhelmed and moved," he said. "I want to get into teaching to become involved with students, much like our chaperones on this trip, to help pass along the message of the Holocaust."