

Feature story

A Life Changing Experience

Inner city students visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington

By MORAINA HOCHMAN

I was very fortunate this past spring to participate in the May 9-12, 2010 Asper Foundation's Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program.

This program generously educates and illuminates thousands of grade nine students about human rights issues yesterday and today by way of studying about the Holocaust and culminating in an amazing trip to Washington, DC to visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Since its 1997 inception in Winnipeg, MB, one of Canada's largest educational initiatives has now reached over 8,200 high school students and chaperones in 110 cities and communities spanning 12 provinces and territories.

The Asper Foundation, in partnership with other community organizations, funds the participation of high school students and their chaperones in the program, with students contributing a portion of the cost. Students are also required to volunteer in their communities on public projects of their choosing.

The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies



Winnipeg inner city schools students (in front of Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC) May 2010.

Program is aimed at promoting understanding and sensitizing Canadian high school students to the consequences of racism.

Dealing with topics ranging from racism to genocide, the curriculum was developed specifically by human rights and Holocaust educators for the Asper Foundation.

The extraordinary success and impact of this program in communities across Canada was the inspiration for the original vision of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights presently under construction in our own city of Winnipeg!

We were part of a group of Winnipeg inner city students who benefited from this learning, meeting youth from across Canada and expanding their minds and hearts. As a teacher at Children of the

Earth High School, I was privileged to co-chaperone eight of our students with my colleague Steve Zimberg.

Our fearless leader, Renee Kaplan, Coordinator of the Winnipeg Inner City Schools Program, did an incredible job of guiding our children through an emotional roller coaster of tears and laughter. We gathered at the Asper Campus for nine evening classes prior to our trip, where we watched as these students changed before our eyes; expressing outrage, sadness, shock and horror at what they were exposed to through Renee's firm yet gentle teachings.

The teachings included studying the events of the Holocaust through original footage and oral histories in the documentary, "The Holocaust-In Memory of Millions" and studying propaganda through the video, "The Fatal Attraction of Adolf Hitler."

A novel study of Daniel's Story, by Winnipeg author Carol Matas, made the Holocaust Museum's exhibit of Daniel's home and journey more relevant. (Daniel's Story was published in conjunction with an exhibit called "Daniel's Story: Remember the Children".)

The students were moved and inspired by the personal survivors' stories of Barbara Goszer in Winnipeg and Louisa Lawrence-Israels in Washington. The 18-hour education program on human rights and the Holocaust included an emphasis on American history, the civil rights movement and the current situation in Canada and the world.

The similarity of abuses suffered by First Nations and Jewish people did not escape our students.

One of our students, Kayla Rae, was quick to point out the parallel during a class discussion, which led to other students' acknowledgement of their diverse cultural stories. The students bonded, some came out of their shells, and they got to know each other and themselves better through this experience.

For some, travelling for the first time outside of Canada, Manitoba, and even Winnipeg, was something they will never forget. Four very full and well-organized days touring several museums (a full day at the United States Holocaust Memorial

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(Cont. on page 49. See "Holocaust program".)

Feature story

Holocaust program

(Cont. from page 48.)

and even time to shop at the Pentagon City Mall, left us all breathless, emotional at times, and pleasantly exhausted. Of course, the focus of the trip was the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This journal entry reveals one of our student's insights:

May 9, 2010

Today was amazing. I had no idea Washington was this beautiful! Going to all the monuments was extraordinary. I just couldn't believe

This museum is unbelievable! Just imagining what these people went through brings me to tears. How could anyone have such hatred to pain someone this way?

my eyes. The White House had to have been my favourite! It was breathtaking. I am sooo tired though!

May 10, 2010

One thing that really got me thinking was the exhibit on the 4th floor about burning Jewish books. Helen Keller, having her books burned said, "Tyranny cannot defeat the power of ideas." She is an inspiration.

On the 3rd floor, I went into the cattle car that the Nazis transported Jews in. Horrible! I also saw the barracks and the stones that men had to carry up and down the 'staircase of death'.

On the 2nd floor, I learned that the Danish saved their Jews from the Nazis, but only 81 survived. They were the only country that did so.

The museum was put together wonderfully, but it's just unbelievable, horrific!

Amy Bousquet

Upon returning to Winnipeg, the students began preparing for their presentation at the Graduation Ceremony held at Tec Voc High School on June 10. Our students combined a video montage of personal comments sitting on the grass outside of the Holocaust Museum in Washington with a traditional honour drum song by Colten Pratt and a speech by Amy Bousquet. All of the groups delivered emotional and heartfelt responses to their experience

Museum), important monuments relating to human rights and freedom, a wonderful interactive comedy at the Kennedy Centre,

which visibly moved all who attended.

Finally, each student was presented with their own Memorandum for Personal Responsibility which they signed and carried proudly back to their families. This Memorandum asks each student to not be indifferent, to remember the past so they can make a difference in the future and to uphold one of the most important lessons of the Holocaust, that of personal responsibility for the world community.

This program, envisioned by the late Dr. Israel Asper, sends ripples of healing beyond for generations to come. Having witnessed the transformation in our students, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of this program and

can only thank from the bottom of my heart, The Asper Foundation, Renee Kaplan, and all of those involved for a truly Life-Changing Experience!

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