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Horror hit home for Holocaust students

Danielle Wong

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Danielle Vaknin used to attend a Jewish school and has family members who fought in the Second World War, but it was a recent trip to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum that hit close to home.

Vaknin and 82 other area students travelled to Washington, D.C., two weeks ago, concluding an eight-session program that encouraged young people to discuss human rights issues.

"To see the cattle car, shoes and tattoos, witnessing it is mind-blowing," the 15-year-old Highland Secondary School student said. "It really opened up my eyes to how grateful I am my family survived."

Vaknin joined other students graduating from the 2011 Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program at a ceremony at Temple Anshe Sholom in Hamilton.

The biannual program is administered by the Hamilton Jewish Federation's Holocaust education committee and is funded primarily by the Asper Foundation.

The program is taught by Hamilton public and Catholic board teachers and the federation's educators, and consists of workshops on human rights, genocide studies, Holocaust education and personal responsibility.

The 83 students from the public and Catholic boards come from a variety of backgrounds, and the curriculum itself has broadened its scope to discuss "modern hate and genocide", global responsibility and citizenship and bullying, program chair Madeleine Levy said. "We represent the mosaic of Canada, the mosaic of Hamilton."

To participate in the program, the students, ages 14 to 17, had to write an essay about why human rights are important to them.

This year, they invited survivors of the Holocaust, Rwandan genocide and native residential schools to speak about their experiences, Levy said.

"They have to understand that they have a voice and that any act they can do to be an upstander instead of a bystander ... each one of them has the grace and their own personal wherewithal to make a profound difference in their schools and their community," Levy said.

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Asper award. Students graduating from the Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program listen to opening remarks at a ceremony in their honour at Temple Anshe Sholom. Gary Yokoyama/The Hamilton SpectatorSource: The Hamilton Spectator