Lessons learned from the Holocaust

Trinity High’s Bass chosen by state council for trip to museum in D.C.

BY DEBBIE HIGHTOWER

Some students often have no concept of the World War II-era Holocaust in which millions of people were systematically murdered.

The Holocaust was a genocide in which Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany and its World War II collaborators killed some six million Jews, possibly more, during the years of 1933-1945.

After being personally impacted by two trips to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum this past summer, Trinity High School teacher Erin Bass plans to incorporate what she learned into lessons for students in grades nine through 12.

Although she put in her application months before, Bass, who has taught at Trinity High for 11 years, said she never expected to be selected for both of the trips that would take her to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

In June she was among 30 North Carolina educators selected by N.C. Council on the Holocaust/Holocaust Foundation for the trip. The experience included literature and resources which the teachers could use in their classrooms to help their students understand historical events.

On the syllabus for her World Literature class are works such as Elie Weisel’s “Night.” Literature is one thing, but firsthand accounts served to bring her and other educators closer to the subject.

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"We heard about three types of people — those who died in the death camps, those who survived and those who were hidden during the war," said Bass. "On day two we heard from a survivor who was a hidden child. Her family was actually five blocks away from Anne Frank’s hiding place."

Much of the data within the museum documents conditions at Auschwitz, a three-camp complex in Poland that was one of the largest death camps operated by the Nazis. Most of the 1.1 million men, women and children who lost their lives at Auschwitz died within hours of their arrival there.

Bass would return to the museum in July as one of 221 participants from all over the country who attended the 24th annual Arthur and Rochelle Belfer National Conference for Educators. There the educators teamed up with museum educators and scholars in sharing rationales, strategies and approaches for teaching about the Holocaust, Nazi propaganda and antisemitism by using various media, such as literature, survivor testimony and diaries from the museum’s extensive permanent collection. Program participants also heard from Theodora Rayman and Louise Lawrence-Israels, two Holocaust survivors who volunteer at the museum.

Bass has taken groups of students to the museum before, but one exhibit that impacts her every time is a three-story room covered with photos of hundreds of Holocaust victims. Individuals portrayed come from all walks of life and include baby photos, family group pictures, wedding photos and old people.

"The photos in this room were from a Jewish community," said Bass. "Most of the pictures we have of the Holocaust itself are from the Auschwitz album. One lady who was suffering from typhus toward the end of the war was looking for a blanket and found it in a Nazi officer’s desk. She just kept it."

Another exhibit documented the plight of European refugees who tried to send the children of those threatened with genocide to safety in the United States. When 938 passengers aboard the Hamburg-America Lines Ship St. Louis were refused landing in Miami, Fla., most of them ended up returning to their homeland where they later perished.

Bass found it interesting that new data about the Holocaust turns up all the time. Historical narratives were recently found buried in milk cans in the German ghettos that had been populated by entire Jewish communities. They always have

"There is something on there about how people mistreat other people," Bass continued. "That’s the biggest lesson our students need to know is how to treat other people. They are so impressionable. We see a lot of the future generation every day so it’s important to impart that lesson to them."

"I think that every time you turn on the TV or look at social media, there is something..."