

Her Holocaust story brings tears, inspiration

Islander is part of documentary screened at event

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In a stunning black hat with a delicate flower, Goldie Schwartz sat anxiously at Table 4 at the Staten Island Advance's annual Women of Achievement luncheon.

"I'm very nervous for people to see my film," she said.

Schwartz, 88, is a Staten Island Holocaust survivor and about 700 people would soon be watching a 10-minute film about her experience.

She said she was uneasy because it's difficult for her to talk about — and for people to hear about — the Holocaust.

She tells it anyway because "it's important for the world to know what happened," she said.

The shades were pulled down, the lights were shut, and Schwartz's face was projected on screens through the ballroom at the Hilton Garden Inn in Bloomfield on Thursday.

In a soft voice with a heavy accent, she began her story. When she spoke about her parents and siblings being taken to the crematorium, the room of attendees gasped. When she spoke about how she cried out for her mother, nearly everybody in the room began to tear.

When she spoke about the Russian liberation and how the soldiers who freed them also raped them, people shook their heads in disbelief. She was only 15 years old at the time. The pink cloth napkins on the table were



Holocaust survivor and Staten Island resident Goldie Schwartz reacts to a question from Advance Executive Editor Brian J. Laline at the Women of Achievement luncheon. Bill Lyons, Staten Island Advance

used to wipe away tears. The reflection of the screens showed glassy eyes throughout the room.

But the film came to a joyous ending: Schwartz said she has more grandchildren and great-grandchildren than she can count, Friday is the busiest day of her week when they all call her and most importantly, she survived.

Brian Laline, executive editor of the Staten Island Advance, said this is a special moment for the borough's local newspaper.

"What makes it so special for our newspaper is that this is what we do. We shine a light on things," Laline said.

"And the testimonies ... these are your neighbors. These are Staten Islanders

who call this place home."

The video was the creation of Staten Island Advance multimedia specialist Shira Stoll.

The complete video — "Where Life Leads You, Stories of Staten Island Holocaust Survivors" — has been shown on SILive.com and at events in the community. Shorter versions focusing on individual stories — like that of Goldie Schwartz — will be released in several weeks.

"There are stories hidden in every community and having the ability to find out more about them and having an outlet to report and share those stories is what makes me love journalism," Stoll said.

She was inspired by Helen Freibrun, her "third grandmother" and child-

hood hero, who shared her Holocaust story with Stoll when Stoll was 8 years old. "She passed away in 2011 and my biggest regret was never recording her story; I'd always wanted to record it on video," Stoll said. "I think she always hoped that I would continue to tell her story."

Stoll's work assignment in June 2017 at Café Europa at the Jewish Community Center (JCC) of Staten Island reignited her fire to continue telling Freibrun's story through others. The event at the JCC was a celebration of life for local Holocaust survivors. They danced, sang and celebrated their lives that at one point, they didn't think they'd ever have. The celebration motivated Stoll to begin the project, she said.

EDUCATING FUTURE GENERATIONS

Stoll's feature film, which tells the stories of nearly one dozen Staten Island Holocaust survivors, will be utilized in public, private and Catholic schools throughout Staten Island to educate future generations about the Holocaust.

"This will give the children an opportunity to learn — and not just through a textbook.

"This will resonate better because these people could live down the street from them; it's their community," Stoll said.

She said learning about history from a local perspective is something Stoll thinks is missing from education and could give children a better understanding

of historical events.

"When you have a woman crying about the moment she realized that her mother was dead instead of an old historical film with a monotone narrator's voice, that's something you're going to remember," said Stoll.

Lori Weintrob, a professor at Wagner College and director of the Wagner College Holocaust Center, who Stoll said was the "backbone" of the project, said it's Stoll's intimate, powerful and personal storytelling that will resonate with children.

"That's what I love about her films; one of the worst problems in our society is it's so hard to be engaged and morally attached to people you don't know and she's bringing neighbors into our schools through this film in a way that I think the young generation can be committed to remembrance," Weintrob said.

The films were a learning experience for Stoll as well. She said she didn't know that the Russian liberators raped women and young girls until Schwartz spoke about it during her interview.

"I was very happy that I was liberated but the Russians were not nice to us; they only wanted sex. It was terrible, I was only 15," Schwartz recalled in a quiet voice, looking directly into the camera before turning her head and staring out the window.

"When I was talking to [the survivors] I realized that their faces would glaze over, their eyes would shift elsewhere.

"They were talking to me and telling me their story but they weren't here with me anymore — they were back [at the concentration camps]," Stoll said.

"They actually see it."