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Students carry the words of Holocaust survivors through performance

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"It's a story that has to be told."

Those words, spoken by Holocaust survivor Egon Salmon, echo through the voices of students who bring the powerful message of "never forget" to life.

At Wagner College, Lori Weintrob, history professor and director of the Wagner College Holocaust Center, partnered with theater professor and actor Theresa McCarthy to create a class which connects students with Holocaust survivors.

The class, known as Learning Community One (LC1), urges students to think differently about the Holocaust by studying and memorizing survivor testimonies and performing those monologues in a play.

WHY NOW?

In a 2018 study, Schoen Consulting, commissioned by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference), discovered that 45% of adults could not name one of the 40,000 concentration camps or ghettos during the Holocaust.

The study also found that 80% of Americans have not visited a Holocaust museum and 66% do not know or know of a Holocaust survivor. It also found that as many as 66% of millennials did not know what Auschwitz was.

The astonishing numbers suggest that younger generations, specifically millennials, are less familiar with the Holocaust.

This class challenges students to defy these statistics and pass the survivor stories to the next generation.

From 2017 to 2019, Advance multimedia specialist Shira Stoll followed a group of Wagner College students taking the class through this journey of meeting survivors for the first time at a Rosh Hashanah celebration, to studying the survivors in class, memorizing their words and performing their stories in front of an audience.



HOW IT BEGAN

The idea for the class began in 2010 when Weintrob met Holocaust survivor Egon Salmon and she realized that Staten Island had a lot of Holocaust stories.

"Egon's father's story of being in Dachau and then released, and the Nazis allowing a Jewish family to flee who came straight to Staten Island, really was at the intersection of two things I'm so passionate about: Holocaust remembrance and local history," said Weintrob.

In 2011, Selfhelp Community Services estimated that approximately 453 Holocaust survivors would be living in the Bor-

ough of Parks in 2018. By 2020, they expect that number to fall to 381. Weintrob wanted to connect students with survivors in their community so that they would feel more connected to them.

They learned the story of Margot Capell, who escaped Germany as a child but never saw her parents again; Romi Cohn, who was the youngest partisan to fight the Nazis and who saved more than 50 families from persecution; Gabi Held, who survived Bergen-Belsen and became a boxer after the war; Rachel Roth who smuggled in guns

SEE STUDENTS, E8

Holocaust survivor Rachel Roth reveals her number tattoo from Auschwitz to Wagner College students after the performance of 2018's "In Light of One Another."

Shira Stoll, Staten Island Advance



In this 2018 Advance file photo, Wagner College students perform "In Light of One Another," a musical that portrays the lives of six Staten Island survivors. Shira Stoll, Staten Island Advance

Students

FROM E1

during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and went on to survive Majdanek and Auschwitz; Egon Salmon, who escaped Nazi Germany with his whole family on the SS St. Louis and obtained papers to come to America, and Hannah Steiner, who lost her mother in Auschwitz but found love after the war.

Each of the stories show extreme cases of resilience, tragedy and hope.

Weintrob was also moved by the words of Nobel laureate, author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who said, "Whoever listens to a witness becomes a witness." This quote became the basis of the class.

As the students memorized the words of these survivors, they became the next generation of witnesses to the Holocaust. It would be their responsibility to continue the words and keep the stories alive.

HOW IT EVOLVED

In the spring of 2017, McCarthy and Weintrob received a \$50,000 grant from the Leonard B. Kahn Foundation through Wagner College trustee Marc Lebovitz. The grant

was meant to expand the work and impact Jewish life in New Jersey and allowed funds for hiring a director and a composer.

Obie Award winning actor and writer Martin Moran was hired to co-write the piece with Weintrob. Grammy-nominated orchestrator and composer David Dabbon was brought on to write original music for the play. McCarthy directed the show.

The first rendition of the play, titled "In Light of One Another" premiered March 15, 2018, at Stage One at Wagner College.

Twelve Wagner College students who took the LC1 class performed the testimony of six Holocaust survivors from Germany, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania.

McCarthy said that the students were the perfect people to portray these real life stories.

"They come to it with a genuine curiosity about the people that they're studying. They just really want to honor these survivors," she said.

The survivors whose stories were told in the play sat in the audience, captivated by

their own words being recited back to them.

"[The survivors] moved us with the force of their presence, they are like rock stars to us," McCarthy said.

"And those kids were sobbing when they met those heroes."

"In Light of One Another" was performed five times at Wagner College and traveled to two New Jersey synagogues.

One year later, it evolved into a new rendition of the show directed by Mickey Tennenbaum titled "Rise Up: Young Holocaust Heroes." Tennenbaum recast the play with Wagner College theater students, and it premiered at the St. George Theatre in April to commemorate Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day).

The play will be performed again at the St. George Theatre on April 22, and is expected to run each April for the next five years.

The stories of Margot, Romi, Gabi, Rachel, Egon and Hannah live on another year, through the words of the next generation.

We invite you to watch the students' journey on SILive.com.

"[The students] come to it with a genuine curiosity about the people that they're studying. They just really want to honor these survivors."

Theresa McCarthy, theater professor and actor