

*I never met a survivor before.*

*I didn't realize that kids my age were separated from their parents.*

*I am a witness.*

These are the reactions of the participants in UJA-Federation's Witness Project in Long Island, New York. The Witness Project was created four years ago to bring together high school students and Holocaust survivors. Our goal is to teach future generations the lessons of the Holocaust, and to empower them to use those lessons to fight hate and prejudice today. As someone who has worked in Holocaust education for 20 years, I believe this innovative program is especially effective in making the Holocaust relevant for young people today.

During the course of the yearlong program, teens and survivors meet twice a month to learn about the survivors' lives before, during, and after the war. Together, the students and survivors explore issues of loss and trauma, hope and resilience. After meeting with the survivors and hearing their testimonies, students work on a collaborative multi-media performance. As new witnesses, they tell the survivors' stories to the community through a large scale event that showcases the stories through art and theater.

For the theater piece, the students transform themselves to tell the survivor's experience. When student Josh put on a prisoner uniform that was similar to one that survivor Irving Roth wore at Auschwitz, he was moved to tears. When the students all had to wear yellow stars that read "Jude", they immediately understood the impact of being marked and losing freedoms. When Ruth Mermelstein told the teens about being separated from family, having her hair shaved, her belongings taken, and the rows of latrines with no privacy, they realized what inhumanity feels like.

The students also put their feelings into creative art forms for the art exhibit. They created collages of words and quotes from the survivors. They took photos of the numbers on the survivors' arms. Some created poems to express their feelings and describe their emotions.

In typical years, the final event has thousands of people in attendance. The audience first moves through an art exhibit with drawings, paintings, and sculptures created by the teens and inspired by the survivors' testimonies. Next the audience enters the theater, where the students tell the survivors' stories theatrically on stage. We incorporate music and video into the theater production. Due to COVID, we have shifted to a film and video format, but the core concept remains the same – The students use art and performance to tell the survivors' stories, an emotional conclusion that highlights the powerful relationships created during their time together. We pledge that we will never be bystanders in the face of hate. The

Witness Project also provides an opportunity for students to get to know survivors as people, who are not only defined by their experience in the Holocaust. We have had baking sessions, where we learn to make challah together, and we've worked on collaborative art projects. One survivor joked with a teen that the student didn't know how to properly crack an egg. Another told the students about the last Passover meal she had with her family in Sighet before they were forced into the ghetto.

The students also learn about the needs of the survivors as they are aging. Teens bring Shabbat meals to the survivors' homes, and especially during COVID, the teens check in with the survivors and help them with grocery shopping and anything else they may need. This year, our staff and students made sure that all of our survivors were able to get appointments and scheduled for COVID vaccinations.

The most important aspect of The Witness Project is making sure that the students use the lessons they've learned from the survivors to fight anti-Semitism and all forms of hate today. They learn that as witnesses, it becomes our responsibility to speak out when we see acts of hatred, racism and discrimination in any form. Our students are agents of change, spreading messaging of respect and inclusion, to ensure that "Never Again" is a reality.