

## Chapter Twelve

### *The Center for Holocaust Studies at Brookdale Community College: A Case Study*

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The following is the case study of the first Holocaust center, located at Brookdale Community College.

The Center for Holocaust Studies at Brookdale Community College (now known as The Center for Holocaust, Human Rights, and Genocide Education—CHHANGE) grew out of a faculty development program grant awarded to us, Professor Siegler of the Psychology Department and Professor Needle of the History Department, in the spring of 1977. We scheduled four lunchtime programs around the theme: “Why Study the Holocaust?”

An exhibition was part of the program and it was mainly about the ship *Exodus*, which was used in 1947 by the *Haganah* to bring Jewish refugees to Palestine. Most of the photographs and artifacts were provided by Reverend John Grauel, a crew member on the *Exodus* and subsequently a speaker at the United Nations favoring the creation of the state of Israel. Reverend Grauel was our first speaker. The grant took the Brookdale faculty members through more than one hundred lectures over the next three decades. As it turned out the programs drew a larger than expected audience that included not only faculty but students and the general public as well.

During the initial program, the first of many astonishing, many times gratifying, incidents happened. The room had been darkened for a lecture slide presentation by a speaker who recently had made pilgrimages to several concentration camps. When he showed the insides of a barracks, a voice

spoke out, "Oh God, that's my bunk!" The audience of some fifty persons was breathless as a distinct shiver struck every person. And so inadvertently, Brookdale had its first survivor's testimony.

And the surprises went on; a man in back stood up, gave his name and announced that he had been a member of the *Wehrmacht*, the German army. He personally apologized for any part he (and others) had played in the atrocities.

Shortly after the conclusion of the programs the two faculty members met with Dean Norma Klein of the Community Services Division (adult-ed non-credit) of the College. The concept of a Center for Holocaust Studies was discussed, and with Dean Klein's encouragement and guidance a decision was made to go ahead with the necessary planning. The Center was to be a resource for students and teachers and would start out offering lecture series, panel discussion, and film programs.

The official opening, scheduled for May 9, 1979, would be held in the College library where we had secured a small bookcase and file for the beginnings of our collection of materials. To the opening we invited the Brookdale's president and the public. Speakers included Arno Penzias, a Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winning scientist from nearby Bell Labs as well as a representative of ADL.

We quickly realized that the most desirable spokespersons to give authenticity and passion to the topic were the survivors. Survivors gave the students and audiences an opportunity to touch history and they responded with rapt attention and emotion. So among our early speakers were Vladka Meed, Luna Kaufman, Fred Spiegel, Bill Kornbluth, Gerry Blumenthal, and Erica Rosenthal.

Brochures were developed and mailed to the community soliciting memberships and other donations. Small donations began to arrive, and we took the accumulated funds on a shopping tour to Barnes and Noble in NYC for our newly established library.

To reach out for more help we began by contacting Joann

Lipshires at the State Department of Education. She steered us to Dr. Lillian White Stevens who gave us other contacts, including the teaching teams at Vineland and Teaneck who were testing their curriculum “Holocaust and Genocide: A Search for Conscience.”

The school year 1979-1980 saw the kickoff of programs offered by the Center. Several important events influenced the growth of the Center. First of all, the programs were surprisingly well attended and yielded, among other things, a group of interested and committed teachers and survivors who wanted to help the Center grow.

In particular it is important to mention the contribution of teacher-historian Gary Kulhanjian who brought us into contact with the local Armenian community. Our programming regarding the genocide of the Armenians 1914-1923 has been an essential part of our Center’s work since those early days. Among the best decisions we made was to sponsor the annual Armenian Genocide program which has included the leading authority on that genocide, Dr. Richard Hovanissian, and also included Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, Peter Balakian, and Vahakn Dadrian.

We reached out to local survivors by contacting congregations throughout the area. We developed an Advisory Board of local leaders selected by Dean Klein. She also assigned one of her employees to assist with our work. The College ultimately decided to release each of us from one teaching assignment each semester. We put a desk and a book shelf in one of the College’s horse-stall offices and stuffed it with volunteers.

Survivors were among the first volunteers at the Center. For more than a decade, Erica Rosenthal was our iron-fisted office manager; Ruth Knopp organized the helter-skelter collection of books, articles and papers into a properly functioning library and vertical file system; and John Woolf was the facilitator of making bare rooms into classrooms, meeting rooms, art galleries, etc. The survivors working at the Center

attracted volunteers who were honored and fascinated to be working with survivors doing the necessary but sometimes tedious work that any organization does. The Center today boasts more than 100 volunteers.

As we got underway we were contacted by representatives from both Kean (College) University and Ramapo College who were contemplating Holocaust related programs. They came down to Brookdale, and we spent time sharing all our start-up experience with them. And so we were off and running trying everything we could create in the way of programs. To attract a diverse Monmouth County population, we decided to include programs on other genocides. Our first series included the Armenians, the Irish, the American Indian, and African-American slavery, all presented by local faculty. We sought all sorts of resources for our Center collection— and reaching out to all sorts of workers in the field of Holocaust and Genocide including Dr. Franklin Littell of Temple University, Father John Morley and Sister Rose Thering of Seton Hall, the Vineland-Teaneck teams, and whomever we could meet at related gatherings of scholars throughout the northeast. It was an exciting and stimulating time. By far the most significant outreach has been to Holocaust survivors and Second Generation. They are the center of our motivation and programs and provide unwavering support. In the classroom they are the most effective teachers.

Among other innovations were the following: 1) a credit level course “Dimensions of the Holocaust” which we team taught; 2) a scholarship program to send a local teacher to Israel to study at Yad Vashem each summer; 3) Writing and Art contests for local school students; 4) an annual colloquium bringing students, faculty and the public to hear a major speaker and attend a variety of workshops; and 5) a two-week teacher training workshop on campus each summer.

We raised money by collecting honoraria each time we spoke at schools, churches, synagogues, local service clubs, and by seeking grants from a variety of sources. Our Board of

Trustees undertook raising funds. The big breakthrough was an annual fundraising dinner originated by Linda Halloran, our first president. Name-recognized honorees were induced to lend themselves to help us. During the early years Board President David Cohen used his connections as former Mayor of Holmdel, to attract honorees. Over the past twenty years contact with honorees and the exponential growth of the Center has been the work of President Al Zager. The College contribution was space, printing, phone, postage and other in-kind help. Building our new facility is the ultimate College gift.

Our experience was extraordinary in terms of the instant collegiality, warm friendliness, and willingness to share ideas that certainly typified the evolution of Holocaust education in New Jersey. As other programs evolved we were especially benefitted by the frequent cordial get-togethers by all those committed to this work.

We owe a great deal as well to New Jersey legislators and governors who backed our programs and ideas and, in particular, to the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education and Dr. Paul B. Winkler, Executive Director of the Commission.

The Center was a founding member of the Association of Holocaust Organizations (AHO) which gave us an opportunity to cross-fertilize ideas from around the nation. One example: a concept that came from an AHO meeting in Houston where we heard of a Washington, D.C. area police department requiring its officers to visit and hear lectures at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. From this, Jane Denny and Dale Daniels, the Center's Education Director and Executive Director respectively, developed a bias crime program with Monmouth and Ocean County Prosecutor's Offices that is unique in the nation.

In conclusion it is worthwhile to say that from the beginning we worked and campaigned for greater community support, more space for our Center's work, more funding from increasing needs, and for as much creativity as we could pluck

from the gifted brains of our staff and friends.

This has been a rare and wonderful thirty-six year experience in participating in the fulfillment of a dream. We are pleased we were able to get New Jersey off to a meaningful start in Holocaust and genocide education.