

Educators' Conference promotes respect and understanding

by Elena Barr Baum

The 10th biennial Educators' Conference, sponsored by the Holocaust Commission of the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater, addressed the reality that Bad Things Happen to Good People...Even Kids. The three day event focused on the ever-present specter of bullying in (and out of) schools, as well as its direct connection to historical events like the Holocaust. Attendees came from public and private early childhood, elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as colleges and social service agencies, to learn how to create a caring community in their classrooms, instill respect for others, and understand how better to teach the Holocaust to students of all ages, even when survivors are not available to provide firsthand testimony.

The 2011 Educators' Conference, underwritten by the Sam and Reba Sandler Family Foundation, began on Monday, Aug. 1 at the Ted Constant Convocation Center at Old Dominion University.

In past years, teachers began with non-Holocaust education and were treated to a trip to the Virginia Holocaust Museum at the end of the conference. This year, however, the committee decided that the Holocaust Commission should open and close with its strength. Gail Flax, conference co-chair, says, "Ultimately everything we do is about Holocaust education and honoring our survivors. We immersed the teachers in that this year, and the results were exactly what we'd hoped for: educators energized to go back to their classrooms and use the lessons of the Holocaust to build more caring and aware students."

Participants met at "the Ted" on Monday morning and boarded a bus to Richmond. Jay Ipson, Museum founder, executive director and survivor, welcomed the group, and talked about why the museum's mission was critical, given the level of bullying in schools. "Most teachers pretend they don't see it," he said, as heads nodded around the beautiful synagogue/auditorium in which he spoke.

The group, 75% of which had never been to the museum before, then went on an informative and emotional docent-led tour of the museum's collections. After a delicious lunch, that participants were told contained about three times the caloric value that the average concentration camp internee would receive in a week, the teachers heard from Dr. Simon Sibelman, assistant executive director, on the roles

played by bystanders and "upstanders" during the Holocaust. He stressed the Nazi policy of collective responsibility, which put everyone at risk, not just the perpetrator of "lawless acts." This made the reality of becoming an upstander rather than a bystander more hazardous to a person's family.

Rena Berlin, the museum's education director, then got down to the classroom level with the group, sharing best practices and ways to make the Holocaust more real to children, from pre-teens to the college bound. She gave the teachers practical resources that many will bring into their classrooms this year.

Day two opened at "the Ted" with a dynamic duo, Brandon Carroll and Shane McCarty. These young men founded a non-profit organization called Actively Caring for People in the wake of the tragic 2007 shooting at their alma mater, Virginia Tech. The goal of ACP is to create a community which values acts of caring initiated simply for their own sake. More than just a "pay it forward" philosophy, this translates in the classroom into a reward system that inspires students to pay attention to their peers and seek to make them feel part of a caring community. In post conference evaluations, participants called the presentation "phenomenal," "excellent," "full of super ideas," and said they would like to implement the program at their schools.

Jonathan Zur, president and CEO of the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, then led the teachers and counselors in an interactive session geared to how to create a sense of belonging for students. "They need to feel safe, valued, heard, and feel they can make a mistake without losing their dignity. This kind of environment will foster learning, and not bullying."

Participants were treated to a dramatic presentation called Pushed, that Zur's VCIC partnered with The Conciliation Project to produce. In it, young actors create scenes reminiscent of those occurring on a daily basis in classrooms, school buses and cafeterias, even in cyberspace. This powerful presentation also included a talk-back session with the actors, who are young enough to remember the bullying they experienced themselves, and trained to help teachers find ways to diffuse and prevent it. One of the young actors was asked by a teacher of high school boys, "How far does teasing have to go before it becomes bullying?" Recalling his own school experiences and drawing on his training, he responded that teasing can only take place within a relationship. "If there is no relationship

between the students involved," he said, "then it is not teasing, but in fact bullying."

Kathleen Wakefield, a retired Virginia Beach teacher and founder of I Need a Lighthouse, an organization she began to combat teen depression and suicide after the tragic loss of her son to these all too common problems, shared the symptoms and warning signs for teachers to look for, as well as the resources that are available to them and kids. She and the other presenters then led breakout sessions with participants, answering more questions and sharing stories and best practices from their own experience.

The third day of the conference had been highly anticipated by many, as the *What We Carry* program, introduced at Yom Hashoah, would be premiered. There was great excitement as the day opened with Christina Frierman, an honors English teacher at First Colonial High School and former Holocaust Commission Teachers' Award winner, sharing the program she created that links bullying behaviors and the Holocaust, and other genocides. The way she makes students care through literature, research, and writing has helped create many more good citizens, aware of their effects on those around them.

After making this connection for the participants, the Commission launched the first two of the four *What We Carry* presentations, which involve video of interview footage of a survivor, combined with archival footage that mirrors their personal history, and scripted material. A vintage suitcase, created by artist Perry Deglandon, containing replicas of many important memorabilia and artifacts from the survivor's life, accompanies the video and presenter. The project's writer and producer, Amber Howell, was on hand to see the debut of the work that began as a work project, but became a labor of love.

Next came the day's keynote speaker, Dr. Leon Weissberg, professor of Holocaust Studies at Lynn University and Southern Region director for the March of the Living. In his talk, entitled, Energizing Tomorrow's Holocaust Educators, Weissberg stressed how important it is to respect survivors' memories, even while trying to imagine teaching the lessons of the Holocaust without them. He shared with the group different ways to use other primary sources than survivor testimony—documents like photography, survivor-created art and poetry—to bring the history alive to students of

all ages. As a child of survivors born in a Displaced Persons Camp in Germany, his views as a second generation survivor as well as his position as a Holocaust scholar informed his animated delivery. The group loved his interactive style and praised the depth he brought to the subject matter.

There was a palpable spirit of respect and understanding in the room.

After lunch the last two *What We Carry* presentations again received thunderous applause. The group, separated for *What We Carry*, came together to hear remarks from local hero and Yad Vashem recognized Righteous Gentile, Dame Mary Barraco, whose work in the Belgian Resistance helped save many Jewish children and their families. She recounted her work with her mother, a beautician who altered the looks of Jewish children so they could pass as Aryan and be placed in safer homes or taken out of the country. She spoke of her fiancé, Arthur, a fellow resistance fighter, and was visibly emotional as she recalled their capture and separation just before they were to leave the country. She survived torture by the Gestapo, but he was killed for his efforts.

A forum of the survivors, Barraco and Weissberg closed the conference, when participants could ask questions of all of them and hung on every word in response. There was a palpable spirit of respect and understanding in the room, as those who teach the next generation reached out to learn all they could from firsthand witnesses to man's inhumanity to man.

Ina Mirman Leiderman, conference co-chair, says, "After working over a year and a half in preparation, hearing the participants declare it was one of the best conferences they had attended was music to my ears. Being able to provide top-notch speakers on bullying, which is one of the top problems in our schools, was wonderful. And hearing Dame Mary Barraco and our local survivors share their stories of bravery in the midst of horror, inspired us as educators to teach our students to be upstanders, NOT bystanders, and to help those who cannot help themselves."

The educators who attended this conference will go back to their classrooms with tools and ideas to make the world a better place for their students' descendants. They will teach them to actively care, and to honor the past, so its worst events are not repeated. As Hanns Loewenbach said at the end of his *What We Carry* video, "Evil does not need your help; just your indifference."