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UMASS AMHERST

Teaching the Holocaust through writing



Momodou Sarr, second from right, with teachers from the U.S. and Senegal

By Harry D. Wall
Special to The Advocate

AMHERST — What brought 20 educators, many of them English teachers from New England, to take a week out of their summer vacation to a seminar on Holocaust education?

“We have a passion for teaching, for literature, and for social justice,” said Cara Crandall, co-facilitator of the program, which took place at the University of Massachusetts campus here. “The Holocaust is the lens through which we can bring this together, to impact our students and communities.”

The Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Education and Human Rights sponsored the seminar, the fourth annual program at Amherst. It was conducted in collaboration with the Western Massachusetts Writing Project, a professional

development program for K-12 teachers that focuses on reading and reflective writing as means to present issues of social justice.

For many of the teachers, this was the first time they immersed themselves in such an in-depth study of and methods for teaching the Holocaust. That was especially true for two educators who came from Senegal, who had no grounding in the Holocaust, but found that it provided a means to teach about slavery and oppression of Africans by colonialists.

During the week, teachers pored over Holocaust-era texts, memoirs and poetry. They were encouraged to use writing as a means to explore and understand atrocities, their causes and impacts.

“For me, personally, a voracious reader,” Crandall said, “it was only when as a child I

read Anne Frank’s diary in the 1970s that I became aware of the Holocaust. It was barely mentioned in our history books at school.”

For Crandall, a middle school teacher in Longmeadow, that was a life-changing experience.

“The Holocaust became for me some huge question about humanity that I felt the need to answer,” she said. “And as a teacher, to embed that in all the work that I do.”

The Amherst seminar is one of many that the institute organizes for teachers around the U.S. and in Europe. Its purpose is to provide teachers with the pedagogical resources to teach the Holocaust and apply it to contemporary issues, from intolerance in the community to genocide.

Crandall became a facilitator after attending the institute’s national professional development seminar in 2013. “It changed my life,” she said.

Working with English teachers, as well as educators from other disciplines, the result is not to box the Holocaust into one chapter of history in a school curriculum.

“I create an arc throughout the year,” Crandall said, “weaving through various books and raising questions, such as what does it mean to be ‘the other,’ to demonize and dehumanize? Using literature from the Holocaust, I have found resonance among the students.”

“While my students are very moved by Anne Frank’s diary, they are always profoundly moved by other adolescent diarists who also wrote during the Holocaust,” she said. “We read selections from the anthology, ‘Salvaged Pages.’ These diaries are rich with details that my students can relate to as

teenagers, but unique in experiences that force them to understand the many choiceless choices that faced people in that time.”

Amy McGloughlin-Hatch, one of the participants attending the seminar, invoked the phrase, “Giving voice to the voiceless.”

A teacher at Southeastern Vocational Tech in Brockton, she finds the personal narrative to have the most compelling impact on students.

One of the major challenges for the teachers is to get cooperation from their school administration and their community. Massachusetts is not among the states that require Holocaust education in the school curriculum.

“If I am going to teach teachers, programs like the TOLI seminar provide us with professional legitimacy,” said Stephanie Griffin, who teaches in Kingstown, R.I. and is a passionate activist for social justice. “We have to defend against ignorance and arm our children with knowledge.”

During the week, the teachers, breaking into groups, drew upon literary resources about the Holocaust, genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda, and the humanitarian plight of Syrian and other refugees.

For Momodou Sarr, an administrator with the Western Mass Writing Project and a native of Gambia, where he was imprisoned for his work in human rights, the seminar offered a lens on how to convey the experience of slavery as well as recent hate crimes.

“Our program on language, culture and diversity can draw meaning from the Holocaust education experience, especially on subjects of race and identity,” he said.

Speaking at the seminar was Henia Lewin, a resident of Amherst, who told her harrowing story of surviving the Holocaust as a child in Lithuania.

“Testimony from survivors is one of the most effective means

of impacting students and teachers,” said Jeff Parker, co-facilitator of the seminar. “Unfortunately, the survivors are leaving us.”

Parker noted the number of Holocaust survivors in the U.S. — 160,000 — is rapidly dwindling.

During the week, the teachers visited the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst and the UMass Institute on Holocaust and Genocide, as well as attending Shabbat services at the Jewish Community of Amherst. The rabbi there, Benjamin Wiener, also spoke at the seminar. For many, this was their first opportunity to take part in a synagogue service.

Going back to their communities, with the collective experience and support of their colleagues, the teachers knew it would not be easy.

“To be a Holocaust educator means to create a brave space, where you can have a courageous conversation and know it may hurt,” said Caitlin Corriero, who teaches English in Belmont. “We need to confront hatred and bigotry in our classrooms and in our lives.”

What did the teachers hope to achieve, when they went back to their schools and communities?

“Holocaust educators are ambassadors of hope,” was one message scrawled across the writing board, a reminder from one of the seminar’s many workshops.

The impact of the program is measured neither easily nor rapidly.

“We are planting seeds,” said Cara Crandall. “We may not see them come to fruition for a long time.”

For more information about the Western Massachusetts Writing Project, visit umass.edu/wmwp.

Harry D. Wall is a member of the board of directors of the Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights; visit it at TOLIInstitute.org.

UNTITLED

how will they know?
how will they ever feel
the heavy silence
when she pauses —
how she seems to swallow
the jagged edges of her memory
her eyes close
as if a long blink,
an extra breath,
will smooth the stones
of the story she carries
how will they ever hear
the pain that echoes,
the reverberation of the details
she begins to relive,
trembling her voice,
rippling the well
that floods her eyes
but cannot shake the image
of her father’s lifeless body,
shrinking through the fog
of her departing train
how will they ever feel
the pulse of pride that overpowers
as she recalls the red boots

of her mother,
santa,
the suitcase,
and the risk her parents choose
to save their precious daughter
how will they ever see
the gentle smile in her eyes
the striking light of baby blues
that, despite the horrors,
they have viewed
have not lost their sparkle
how will they ever hear
the urgency in her voice
the tacit demand
that they understand this
can never happen, again.
how will they ever see
she is a human
there is no cape or secret power
to make her someone they can’t be
her personal story
is a story of love
how will they know?

— allie pauline
July 2018



Holocaust survivor Henia Lewin talks with teachers

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