Telling Their Stories: Holocaust Education at SU

When Mary George ’88, M’14 walked into Dr. Diana Wagner’s Holocaust course in July 2013, she couldn’t have imagined how that experience would transform her teaching, her school and her students’ commitment to social justice. During the course, George approached the administration at Salisbury Christian School and proposed developing a nine-week social justice and anti-bullying unit for the seventh grade, and an additional eighth-grade unit about the Holocaust. As the school year draws to a close, George’s students have written persuasive letters to President Roosevelt, analyzed Nazi propaganda tactics, examined the issue of forgiveness and challenged themselves to be “upstanders” for social justice. Dr. James Fox, headmaster of the school, said that George “has used the events of the Holocaust to inform, inspire and transform her students.”

That transformative power of learning about the Holocaust led George to customize her M.Ed. program to focus on social justice issues. Her capstone research project will involve conducting school climate studies, and her graduate program will culminate with enrollment in Wagner’s Holocaust Educators Network Institute in June 2014. “Learning about the Holocaust and other social justice topics taught my students to accept diversity as well as to take action against intolerance,” she said.

Just as George could not have anticipated the impact of this one course, Wagner couldn’t have anticipated the impact of taking high school students to Germany over 25 years ago. When Wagner, now an associate professor in the Education Specialties Department, led her first Austausch program, or exchange program, in Hamburg, Germany, in 1988 — and later in Nuremberg — the experience ultimately shaped her future as an educator. “I remember standing in the Nuremberg stadium — right where Hitler spoke during his party rallies,” she said. “It was there that I began to understand that great power can be used for brutality or for good. As educators, we must work for the good.”

During her career, Wagner has worked with area schools on school climate, social justice and anti-bullying. The opportunity to return to Holocaust studies at SU came when the Eastern Shore Writing Project (ESWP) adopted social justice as its guiding principle. “Because I’m originally an English camp instructor, the opportunity to bring my experience in social justice, writing and the Holocaust together through the Eastern Shore Writing Project seemed to be destiny,” she said. “So many separate experiences in my career have come together for this very moment.”

In 2012 and 2013, Wagner received fellowships to the Memorial Library in New York City, home of the Holocaust Educators Network. Following her fellowship, Wagner and former ESWP Director Stefani Pautz established a series of Holocaust-related workshops and the graduate course for area educators. Because Maryland does not mandate Holocaust training for teachers, educators have been anxious to take part.

Wagner pointed out that the Holocaust is a still-unfolding story. “Tens of millions died during World War II,” she said. “Of the millions who died under Hitler’s orders, we barely know a third of their stories.”

Consequently, Wagner’s research focused on piecing together the individual stories of the Holocaust. “One of the first things the Nazis did was take away people’s names,” she said. “We need to return their names.”

One of Wagner’s projects with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) is to help transcribe primary source documents that were previously unavailable to researchers. In a Łódź ghetto record, for example, Wagner transcribed residence details of a man named Daniel Wajn. Further research revealed that he died in a ghetto hospital of tuberculosis. The fate of Daniel’s wife, Szprinca, remains unverified. “What is important is that there was a man named Daniel and his wife named Szprinca, and now we can remember them,” Wagner said.

Examples like this are what transform Holocaust studies from merely a field of study to a personal mission for Wagner and George. “It’s impossible to get our heads around brutality this large,” Wagner said. “We can’t imagine six million or 10 million or 50 million. And so we have to make it personal. We have to make it about telling individual stories.”

Wagner carries a photo with her from the Warsaw ghetto of a young boy starving in the street. The photo was taken by a German soldier. “That’s my Warsaw bay,” she said. “He has a story. He has a name. One day, I may be able to say who he is and tell his story.”

George’s students examine the experiences of the oppressed as one step on their way to being outspoken advocates for justice and fairness. As one student portrays, justice and fairness is about returning people’s experiences to the light:

Another day has gone into the bottomless pit of time.
Today, like no other, filled with sadness and despair
The shadow of darkness shields me from my fear.
The moonlight shines down lighting my path.
The night is my only escape from the nightmares of the day.
I used to love the light.
But now darkness is my only friend.

- Patrick Helgesen, Grade 8

Wagner noted that the work of Mary George’s students illustrates the special nature of the emerging field of Holocaust pedagogy. “What makes our work unique is that we are not just teaching about what happened during the Holocaust,” she said. “We work with educators on why we should teach the Holocaust and how we can teach it so that our students become empathetic learners and outspoken opponents of discrimination and hatred.”

This emphasis on pedagogy has not gone unnoticed. The Memorial Library has given Wagner a grant to establish a satellite site of the Holocaust Educators Network at SU beginning in June 2014. Dr. Nancy Michelson, chair of the Education Specialties Department, noted that, “based on the mission and values of the University, the satellite Summer Seminar is an excellent match for Salisbury University.”

Additionally, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has invited SU, under the leadership of Wagner and Teacher Education Department faculty member Alexander Pope, to become a regional center for the museum’s Holocaust Institute for Teacher Education (HITE). The HITE program will be offered to pre-service teachers beginning in fall 2014.

Rabbi Arnold Dienstock of Salisbury, who has collaborated with Wagner in her Holocaust course, noted that, “the vision for Holocaust education at Salisbury University flows from the historic mission of this institution (as a teacher’s college).” He noted that the pedagogical approach, “will equip our teachers with the tools which will make Holocaust education both an intellectual and ethically riveting experience.”

In the future, Wagner hopes to expand the opportunities for professional development for teachers and to engage the SU community in Holocaust remembrance activities. While the Memorial Library grant provides initial Institute funding, Wagner is currently working to find donors who can ensure a strong future for Holocaust studies at SU.

For more information about opportunities to participate in social justice and Holocaust education at Salisbury University, please contact Dr. Diana Wagner at dmwagner@salisbury.edu or Dr. Nancy Michelson at nlmichelso@salisbury.edu.