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Wiesenthal centre brings Holocaust, dark periods in Canadian history to students



The Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center's Tour for Humanity mobile education centre rolled into Dr. Frank Hayden Secondary School on April 13. A group of students go to experience a video and talk into the bus, which features the story of the Holocaust as well as recent heroes like Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr., depicted on a mural inside the bus. Pictured, left to right, are students Marisa McMenamie, Andy Lee, Thomas Barbeau and Ell Wiegand as well as tour presenter Daniella Lurion. Photo Credit Graham Paine-Burlington Post

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By Tim Whitnell

The Holocaust and other genocides are difficult subject matters to discuss at the best of times, but they are important learning tools for young, impressionable minds, especially in the context of modern-day concerns about bullying, says a Burlington high school teacher.

Dr. Frank Hayden Secondary School welcomed the Tour for Humanity on Monday. It is a mobile presentation made on a bus whose interior has been converted into a mini theatre.

The Friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies in Toronto brings the tour to schools around southern Ontario.

Since its inception in November 2013, the tour has visited more than 100 schools and addressed about 50,000 elementary and high school students. The centre charges \$500 per visit.

The Hayden S.S. stop featured five 45-minute presentations of the same talk, entitled The Canadian Experience. It is one of several age-appropriate discussions presented on the tour bus by a representative of the Wiesenthal centre, complemented by archival video.

The Canadian Experience is for students between Grades 6-10 with the version for Grades 9 and 10 pupils being “a little more graphic,” said Daniella Lurion, the Wiesenthal centre facilitator who spoke to about 180 Hayden civics, history and social justice class students on Monday.

She said most students are respectful during her talks and seem to be interested, sometimes even affected, by the serious subject matter.

“Teachers tend to be more emotional. Students tend to be more stunned by what they see. High school students tend not to ask questions but the Grades 7s and 8s ask more questions,” she noted.

The most notable reaction to her presentations that Lurion recalled was in Durham Region where students that listened to her talk went out and emptied three area libraries of books on historical figures she had discussed — Anne Frank and Martin Luther King Jr. — without there being any homework assigned on them.

The Canadian Experience talk gives an overview of the Nazi Germany Holocaust, the murder of more than six million mainly Jews during the Second World War, but it focuses on lesser known historical events in Canada like the internment of Japanese Canadians when Canada was at war with Germany and Japan, the Chinese Head Tax and Aboriginal residential schools.

Hayden social sciences teacher Jamie Meyer says he learned of the Tour for Humanity through a professional development activity last November and believed it was worthwhile and relevant for students.

“I like the connections it makes historically to the Holocaust and today with bullying. I enjoyed the section where it talks about teaching and not being a bystander. There is always an opportunity to stop something and make a change.

“They (students) know a lot of this stuff through video games but I don’t think they understood the brutality of it and the scope of it,” Meyer said of the Holocaust.

Two Hayden students who sat through the Canadian Experience presentation said they were already aware of events like the Holocaust, the internment of Canadians of Japanese descent and the attempts of the federal government to forcibly assimilate native Canadians, but that didn’t make it any easier for them to hear it.

“Regarding the Holocaust, I knew a fair amount, but it was still moving,” said Thomas Barbeau, a 16-year-old Grade 11 anthropology student.

“With regard to Canadian history and hate crimes, that is unfortunate, and I didn’t know that the percentage of (police-reported) hate crimes is going up.”

Barbeau said the least people can do is to realize what happened in the past and that it’s “not the way to treat each other.”

Classmate Andy Lee, 17, said of the Holocaust, “No matter how many times you hear about it, it is still shocking — the number of people killed.”

Both teens said they had heard of the Aboriginal residential schools system and the locking up of Japanese Canadians in camps in Canada during the Second World War. What they had no knowledge of was Canada's longstanding practice of a Chinese Head Tax.

The issue goes back to B.C. and Canadian government policies, which targeted Chinese immigrants from 1872-1947.

Canada started charging a head tax in the late 1800s to discourage Chinese immigration. The B.C. government supported the head tax and accepted federal head tax payments.

In 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government apologized and made payments of \$20,000 each to Chinese-Canadians who paid the head tax or their surviving spouses.

For more information, visit www.tourforhumanity.com.

— *with files from the Toronto Star*