Bethesda

Family & Education

Children of Holocaust survivors recount parents' experiences to MCPS Students

Program sends Jewish speakers into schools to share their families' memories

By Em Espey & Ginny Bixby
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Connie Liss tells Wootton history students about her mother's memories of surviving the Holocaust. - Image Credit: Ginny Bixby

When Gaithersburg resident Connie Liss was just a baby, her mother, Dina Jacobson, began telling her about her memories of surviving the Holocaust. Jacobson was in her early twenties when she spent time in Auschwitz, the largest Nazi concentration camp and extermination center during World War II, located in Poland.

Jacobson passed away in 2014. Now Liss is carrying the voice of her mother to the next generation. Last Thursday, she recounted her mother's crisis of faith to a lecture hall full of over 50 history students at Rockville's Wootton High School.

"She said to me, 'I didn't believe in God anymore. But I prayed and prayed [that he would] let me die.' And it looked like her prayer would be answered," Liss told students.

She said her mother remembered a Nazi guard shouting "line up!" and forcing her and other Jewish prisoners to march into a gas chamber.

"That entire night [my mother] sat and waited to die. But she was alive. She walked out. It just didn't happen."

Liss' words captivated the students, who remained glued in silent concentration throughout the presentation. As the bell rang for the next class, several approached Liss to offer hugs and to thank her for sharing.

Liss is one of 12 second-generation Holocaust survivors invited into Montgomery County Public Schools to narrate their families' experiences for students in order to humanize the devastating historical event, thanks to a program sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington.

"These people should be known as people, not just as survivors," Liss told MoCo360.

Amid a well-documented surge in antisemitic incidents across the school district, the new second-generation presenters—called 2Gs—finished training in February and are available for speaking engagements within MCPS and beyond.

Current MCPS curriculum includes one mandatory U.S. history class unit on the Holocaust that students take in ninth or tenth grade, according to school data.

Since the rise in antisemitic incidents in the county, members of the Jewish community and others have called for more education about antisemitism and the Holocaust. The district said earlier this year that it would work with the JCRC and other community partners on this

issue, and it has called on parents to help fight antisemitism at home but has not yet announced curricular changes. A spokesperson for the district did not respond to requests for comment on curriculum for this story.

These speakers represent only the second cohort of 2G presenters to go through the program, called Magid: Generations of the Shoah. *Magid* is the Hebrew word for a Jewish preacher skilled in narrating the Torah and other religious stories. The first cohort of 15 speakers were trained in January 2022 and participated in around eight events across the county. So far this year, presenters have visited Wootton High School twice, and similar events are being planned at other schools throughout the spring.

When asked about the *Magid* program, MCPS spokesperson Jessica Baxter wrote to MoCo360:

"We know educating our students is a large part of the answer to eliminating hate and bias incidents. Any type of programming that raises awareness is welcome as it contributes to our mission of fostering an inclusive and welcoming learning environment."

JCRC associate director Guila Siegel said the need for students to hear these survivor narratives has never been greater.

"As the number of living Holocaust survivors dwindles, the need to re-envision Holocaust education grows more acute," she said. "The 2G generation feels a tremendous obligation to carry on their parents' legacy, but it's not innate in them to know how to distill their parents' narratives in a way that can be presented to students."

To effectively translate their parents' experiences into a 20-minute presentation for students, participants undergo 10 hours of training led by veteran Holocaust educator Peter Nelson. A former New York City public school teacher, Nelson is also the child of Holocaust refugees. He connected with the JCRC through his work with 3GNY, a nonprofit that provides a living link to the lessons of the Holocaust through presentations given by survivors' grandchildren, who are often referred to as 3Gs.

Nelson said the biggest challenge for 2G and 3G presenters is being able to accurately convey traumatic events they didn't live through themselves and cannot be expected to fully understand.

"I've been working as a Holocaust educator for almost 40 years, and I still have no idea what it means to be hunted continuously for four years without any idea of when it will end. It's virtually unfathomable," he said. "But I know it was a horror, and I know I never want anything like it to happen again."

During Liss' presentation at Wootton, she told students about how her mother lost hearing in one ear after being assaulted by a Nazi officer for barely moving her body while standing in line. She also talked about her mother's struggles to integrate back into society after the Holocaust and the ostracization she continued to face.

While being a survivor was integral to her mother's identity, Liss made a point to also share about her mother's stubborn spirit and love of baking.

"It's important for you to know that she lived a life before the Holocaust and after the Holocaust, and I hope you'll get to know her through her words and our relationship," she told students.

The goal of these presentations is to move student listeners to think or act differently, Nelson said.

"We want them to remember the details, and we want it to affect how they deal with their fellow students, people in their community, the country and the world," he said.

To do that effectively, he said he trains speakers to keep their presentations carefully focused on the personal experiences of their parents and to avoid using generalized language like "them" or "the Jews." Speakers are also given free access to the Holocaust Museum as a three-dimensional resource to help ground themselves in the place and history.

Speakers are encouraged to develop vignettes—what Nelson calls "kernels"—of moments their parents can recall in vivid detail, like Jacobson's night spent in a gas chamber. Nelson said

speakers sometimes consult with their parents for additional details or documentation as part of their research.

Bethesda resident Tobi Bassin is an English teacher at Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School and part of the first cohort of speakers trained by Nelson. She said she remembers leaving each training session mentally and physically exhausted.

“You’re living through your parents’ pain each time,” she said. “It’s necessary, but it’s very difficult.”

She described the experience as an opportunity to honor her father, Morley Potash, a Holocaust survivor who died in 2021 at 89 years old. She said it “means the world” to be able to humanize his story of survival to the next generation.

“When you talk about 6 million Jews, the truth of the matter is that those are not people—those are numbers. Kids aren’t going to walk away feeling connected,” she said. “We’re not there to teach the history of the Holocaust. We’re there to share our parents’ memories.”

As a presentation kernel, she described how Potash, who was 10 years old at the time, got sick from eating pig slops out of a neighbor’s farm trough after weeks without a meal. She said he can still remember vividly the greens, grains and potatoes he devoured that day.

Because of how sick Potash became, his mother knocked on a random farmer’s door for help — a deadly risk for a Jew to take in Nazi-occupied Polish territory. A kindly farmer’s wife brought him blueberry tea and allowed the family to hide on their property for eight months.

Bassin said a week after giving her presentation at the day school, a parent approached her and said, “I heard your presentation was amazing. My son came home and told me in detail about the blueberry tea and the food in the trough.”

The need to impart these memories to the next generation of Americans is more urgent now than ever before, Bassin said.

“After the Holocaust, the Jewish community said, ‘Never again.’ But the truth of the matter is that we’ve seen things happen again — and then again and again,” she said. “Every day I hear about more incidents happening right here in Montgomery County, close to me.”

Liss said she believes it’s especially important to have these conversations in schools given the alarming number of antisemitic incidents being reported across the county—which have included hate-based words, flyers, graffiti and anonymous emails.

“Maybe if students understand not just the history, but the human factor of it – these were people, this is what can happen to people, this is what they lived through – then maybe they will stop and think,” Liss said. “At the very least, they might [respond to hearing antisemitic comments by saying], ‘That’s a stupid thing to say,’ or maybe even be strong enough to say, ‘Don’t say it.’ That’s the hope.”

Nelson echoed Liss and Bassin’s sense of urgency.

“All that ‘never again’ means is that we’ll never again have 6 million Jews killed in the period of time from 1939 to 1945,” he said, quoting author Samantha Power in her 2002 nonfiction book *A Problem from Hell.*

“If we don’t look at how we got there,” he added, “we’ll also think we would never do that. History is unfortunately teaching us not to think that way.”