

Encountering Survivors: Students share lessons of the Holocaust



BUY PHOTO

Romana Strochlitz Primus, right, daughter of Holocaust survivors Rose and Sigmund Strochlitz, hugs Fiona Frederiks, a student at Lyme-Old Lyme High School, one of four schools participating in an Encountering Survivors ceremony at Lyme-Old Lyme High School on Wednesday, June 6, 2018. The students gave Primus a stuffed teddy bear as a thank you for all of her efforts in assisting them. Old Saybrook, Ledyard and Waterford schools also participated. (Tim Martin/The Day)

Published June 06, 2018 10:49PM | Updated June 07, 2018 11:35AM

By **Kimberly Drelich** (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=k.drelich) Day staff writer

✉ k.drelich@theday.com (mailto:k.drelich@theday.com) [🐦 KimberlyDrelich](https://www.twitter.com/KimberlyDrelich)
(<http://www.twitter.com/KimberlyDrelich>)

Old Lyme — Romana Strochlitz Primus, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, said it's important in the face of tyranny to realize that individuals have the ability to do something.

During the Holocaust, individuals who refused to go along with it were able to save people, including her sister, she said.

Strochlitz Primus said Lyme-Old Lyme High School students understand how important it is to learn about the Holocaust. They heard the story of her parents, Rose and **Sigmund Strochlitz** (<https://www.theday.com/article/20061017/DAYARC/310179972/0/search>), through the Jewish Federation of Eastern Connecticut's Encountering Survivors program and then organized a trip to Central Europe.

"I think these students, these wonderful students, will do the right thing," she said. "It's not that they wouldn't have known that they should have done the right thing before this but you need to make it concrete. You need to be able to imagine yourself in a bad situation and say, 'OK, what would I do?' I'm very heartened by the way the students have reacted."

As part of the program, small groups of students from Ledyard High School, Lyme-Old Lyme High School, Old Saybrook High School and Waterford High School since September have interviewed program volunteers, who are Holocaust survivors or the children of Holocaust survivors, to learn their personal stories.

A group of Lyme-Old Lyme High School students and their teacher Brett Eckhart were inspired by Strochlitz Primus to take a 10-day trip during their April vacation to visit Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary. Seniors Anna Catlett and Caroline Sirna organized the trip.



BUY PHOTO

Ben Cooper, 96, of West Hartford, who served as a World War II combat medic, 45th Infantry Division, "The Thunderbirds," liberators of Dachau concentration camp, holds up his duffel bag he used while serving as he addresses students from area high schools, including Ledyard, Lyme-Old Lyme, Old Saybrook and Waterford, participating in an Encountering Survivors ceremony at Lyme-Old Lyme High School on Wednesday, June 6, 2018. (Tim Martin/The Day)

Catlett said it was deeply personal to visit Bedzin, Poland, where Sigmund Strochlitz grew up, and walk through the Auschwitz concentration camp knowing that Strochlitz Primus' parents were once imprisoned there.

Sirna said that while the students were visiting the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, they learned from their tour guide that the memorial represented tyranny, as the blocks started small and gradually got so big that they were hard to stop. She likened it to the situation that is gradually building in Syria today.

Strochlitz Primus said it's so important to say "no" from the beginning and learn from history.

Culminating program

On Wednesday, the volunteers, students, teachers and Jewish Federation representative held a culminating program at the Lyme-Old Lyme High School Media Center for the students to give presentations and share what they learned from the volunteers.



BUY PHOTO

Lyme-Old Lyme High School student Angus Tresnan, second from right, stops his speech, having difficulty discussing the Holocaust, and steps to the back of the group, which includes, from left, fellow Lyme-Old Lyme students Anna Catlett, Caroline Sirna and Fiona Frederiks, as they participate in an Encountering Survivors ceremony at Lyme-Old Lyme High School on Wednesday, June 6, 2018. Students from Old Saybrook, Ledyard and Waterford High Schools also participated in the event. (Tim Martin/The Day)

The students gave Strochlitz Primus a teddy bear, since she had bears at her home for the students to hold as they listened to the story.

Ledyard High School students met with Joseph Biber, whose parents, Jacob and Eva Biber, survived the genocide together and came to America in 1947. Delaney Gagnon, a Ledyard High School senior, said that while on the run, whenever Jacob got a slice of bread, he would rip it in two and give half to Eva. She would then rip her piece and give half to Jacob.

"To me, their love played a strong role in their story," Gagnon said. "Not only did it help them make it through these horrific times but it gave them a reason to want to survive."

Waterford High School students met with survivor Oleg Elperin, who became a physics teacher after the war. Old Saybrook High School students met with Steven Powell, the son of Alex and Eva Powell, Holocaust survivors who met in Poland at a displaced persons camp after the war.

"Though I always had great admiration for survivors of such a horrible tragedy, I have gained a new appreciation for their resilience and perseverance," said Isabella Donohue, an Old Saybrook High School student.



BUY PHOTO

Ben Cooper, 96, of West Hartford, who served as a World War II combat medic, 45th Infantry Division, "The Thunderbirds," liberators of Dachau concentration camp, holds up a yellow patch depicting the Star of David, with "Jude" (German for Jew) inscribed in the center that the Nazis forced Jewish people to wear during WWII. Cooper addressed students from Ledyard, Lyme-Old Lyme, Old Saybrook and Waterford participating in an Encountering Survivors ceremony at Lyme-Old Lyme High School on Wednesday, June 6, 2018. (Tim Martin/The Day)

The program volunteers then lit candles in memory of the 6 million Jewish people who died in the Holocaust, as well as local survivors who since have died.

Ben Cooper, 96, gave a presentation sharing his experience as a World War II combat medic and liberator of Dachau concentration camp. He dedicated his talk in memory of **Holocaust survivor Henny Simon** (<https://www.theday.com/local/20170405/prominent-colchester-holocaust-survivor-dies-in-tuesday-crash>), who died in a car crash last April. The two **spoke to students** (<https://www.theday.com/article/20140603/NWS01/306039927/0/search>) for years about the Holocaust and shared the message that "no act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted."

"I'm continuing to speak about what hate and bullying and disrespect for one another did and unfortunately is still doing," Cooper said.

The Encountering Survivors program helps students draw lessons from past and current events, discuss hatred and prejudice and understand how they can create change in their communities and take a look at their own responsibility in creating a just society, said Tammy Kaye, coordinator for the program, which is run by The Rose and Sigmund Strochlitz Holocaust Resource Center of the Jewish Federation of Eastern Connecticut.

Jerry Fischer, the executive director of the Jewish Federation of Eastern Connecticut, said the program started years ago when Holocaust denial seemed to be gaining traction. While there are still deniers, he said society currently is facing "ignorance and inability to accept historical fact." He said the recent revelations of the **ignorance of many high school and college students** (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/04/12/two-thirds-of-millennials-dont-know-what-auschwitz-is-according-to-study-of-fading-holocaust-knowledge/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9b1ea799418c) regarding World War II, particularly the Holocaust, was "astonishing and depressing."

"You all have heard stories from the victims," he told the students on Wednesday. "The horror could be described as unbelievable but it happened, and the thing that we want you to learn from this experience in Encountering Survivors is that it did happen, and we have to do everything in our power to make sure it never happens again, not to Jews, not to gays, not to Rohingya, not to Cambodians."

He called on the students, who have heard the stories firsthand, to speak up in the face of injustice.

The Jewish Federation of Eastern Connecticut welcomes area schools to participate in the program and is enrolling schools for the 2018-19 program. Interested schools can contact Kaye, the program coordinator, at strochlitzhrc@gmail.com (<mailto:strochlitzhrc@gmail.com>) or (860) 442-8062.

k.drelich@theday.com (<mailto:k.drelich@theday.com>)