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Creating Connections

"When I stared into the eyes of the Nazi officer I knew, as a woman, the particular degradation I would be subject to" (Schwartz). These haunting words were spoken by Holocaust survivor Ethel Schwartz as she stood before a group of Long Island teenage girls. I arranged for Schwartz to speak to my Teen Empowerment group, a group organized to foster self-esteem, confidence and activism in teen girls. Although decades separated us in age, and our life experiences were vastly different, our group developed an instant connection with Schwartz that dissipated these differences. Listening to Ethel Schwartz's journey, her words pierced our veils of complacency and gave us a new perspective from which to view the Holocaust-a female perspective. The parallels were overwhelming: Schwartz grew up in a small town, cared for by a close and loving family. Surrounded by friends, she had dreams for her future and what she hoped to achieve. We each saw ourselves in Ethel Schwartz's eyes. My consciousness was jolted into a realization that I could have been one of the 92,000 victims of Ravensbruck, the death camp for women (Ravensbruck). I could have been subjected to the degradation and sadistic "medical" experimentation conducted on women in the concentration camps. It has been observed that "Men and women did suffer the 'same hell' at Auschwitz but the horrors were often remarkably different" (Rittner & Roth). During the Holocaust, women in concentration camps were often subjected to forced sterilization, abortion and rape (Women during Holocaust). As Ethel Schwartz spoke of her memories, her pain and her lost dreams, we began to understand the connection we have with the women who came before us - the mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters and girlfriends-who perished during this dark period in history.

Although my Teen Empowerment Group focused on issues plaguing the women of the Holocaust, the lessons of the Holocaust are not limited to women. Six million victims were murdered because of their religious identity, not their gender. The Holocaust touches us all. The failure to study the Holocaust and implement its lessons has led to modern-day atrocities and continued acts of violence and genocide. Approximately sixty years after the Holocaust, in April 1994, genocide in Rwanda was waged by the Hutu militia against the Tutsis. Ethnic hatred led to an intensive killing campaign, resulting in the loss of 800,000 lives during a 100-day period. The rape of Tutsi women was widespread, as killings and sexual violence were encouraged to achieve the goal of eradicating the Tutsi as a group (Shattered Lives). Global violence continued as Sudanese villagers were subjected to terror and violence by the Janjawid in Darfur. Throughout the world, violations of women's rights are intertwined with larger human rights violations in the area (Alvy).

Human history was forever changed by the Holocaust. Sura Andrezejko was fifteen years old when she was murdered in Auschwitz. Cary Krell, eight years old, died of typhus in the Gross-Rossen concentration camp. Liane Krochmal was seven years old when she was murdered in the gas chambers at Auschwitz (Children). These three young girls, never had the opportunity to live their lives or contribute to society. Which of these three girls, or which of the other six million Jewish lives, might have significantly transformed our understanding of the world? We will never know the great poems that might have been written or the great music that might have been composed. Each time a life is cut short, whether by Nazi's, Hutus or the Janjaweed, a legacy is lost for future generations. What greatness could have occurred from those who were forever silenced?

It is imperative that we remember those who perished at the hands of tyranny in order to prevent future atrocities from occurring. Silent acquiescence to terror and abuse, toward women, or anyone else, is no longer an option. I am part of a generation that is uniquely qualified to address the terror and violence plaguing the world. Raised with a global connectedness and sensibility, our thoughts are communicated instantly and to a global community. It is our turn to carry the lessons of the Holocaust from the past to the present and future generations.

In order for humanity to advance after the Holocaust, we must act in ways that promote mutual respect and tolerance. We must foster a set of values that include an acceptance of differences in others and an emphasis on independent thinking. The most effective way to communicate these principles is by integrating them in our school curriculum, creating a generation of students who have the strength and courage to stand up for their convictions. Elementary school students should learn about the Holocaust through discussions of prejudice and tolerance. Individuals who have stood up for their principles, such as Nelson Mandela and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., must be acknowledged for their humanity. Empowering students with compassion and self-confidence develops conscience, which serves as the best defense against future genocide. At the secondary school level, discussions of the Holocaust should be integrated into the general curriculum, as current social and moral issues are examined. Education which enables students to develop a heightened sense of conscience, an increased awareness of the issues plaguing society and a greater sensitivity to victims, will keep the message of the Holocaust burning bright.

There are many paths to take in combating injustice, prejudice and genocide. Whether it is globally or locally, individually or collectively, we must address these issues in ways that are

reflective of whom we are. In the boardroom or the lunchroom, on the battlefield or the baseball field, we must act according to the lessons and principles of the Holocaust. Each action we take can break barriers and create connections. Whether working in a soup kitchen, raising funds for Darfur or campaigning for the ethical treatment of women in Afghanistan, these actions serve to blur the distinctions between groups: we vs. them; connected vs. disenfranchised; empowered vs. powerless. Developing connections and relationships between diverse people undermines prejudice and hatred, the cornerstones of genocide. Each act brings us farther along the road toward protecting human rights. By organizing an interfaith group for Jewish, Christian and Muslim high school students, I was fostering tolerance in my community. When Adam Sterling, whose family escaped the Holocaust, founded the Sudan Divestment Task Force, he was promoting respect for others (Save Darfur). Presently, I am working with survivors and others committed to Holocaust education to create a mobile Holocaust "museum"-a mini-bus containing Holocaust artifacts (pictures and testimonies) which travels to schools, organizations, etc. We each have the ability to foster dignity and understanding in others, whether in our own backyard or across the globe.

We must create connections: with those who live in fear and terror; with women who are subject to sexual violence; with people who share our views; with people who have dissimilar views; and with our brothers and sisters who need to be treated with tolerance and compassion. We must connect with the lessons of the Holocaust-they help us to define the past, deal with the present and determine the future. By creating these interconnections, we become stronger-empowered to prevent the occurrence of a future genocide.

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