

Teachers attend seminar on Holocaust education
By Elexis Silverman

Thirty-two New Jersey elementary school teachers attended a workshop for teaching about the Holocaust held by the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life Friday on the College Avenue campus event.

The seminar was an opportunity for teachers to share new ideas about how to approach such a difficult topic with a young class, said Karen Small, associate director of the center.

Gail Bergstein, a third-grade teacher from Edison who has attended Bildner Center workshops in the past, said, the annual conference is excellent. "I come back with so many different ideas. ... Every year there are new students that need to be taught tolerance."

New Jersey has mandated that public schools teach students in grades K-12 about the Holocaust, Small said, and there has been an increased need for tools to teach about the Holocaust since the mandate was passed. In addition, state teachers need 100 hours of continuing education over a period of five years, so this program can count towards those hours, Small said.

The teachers at the event expressed various reasons for attending. Some attendees have been teaching about the Holocaust for a number of years and would like to improve their program, while others were interested in finding ways to use the Holocaust to teach students about fundamental issues - like bullying and peer pressure.

Small realized the need to discuss Holocaust education methods for children through her daughter, who is in the second grade. Small said she asked her daughter what she knew about the Holocaust, and her daughter told her, "It is when Jews were put into showers, but instead of water, gas came out and killed them." Small said she was shocked at the graphic information her daughter's teacher used with the sensitive subject.

At a young age, the Holocaust can be a way of teaching tolerance and respect; it doesn't need to be about genocide, Small said.

Psychology Professor Maurice J. Elias spoke about the impact of social and emotional learning. Young children cannot always understand what they are feeling because they don't necessarily have the right tools to express the emotion, he said. Elias gave the group various tools and activities like role-playing and essay writing, which will help young students understand their emotions. "Children need prerequisite skills in order to accurately understand the events," Elias said.

Kathleen Kaleigh, founder and artistic director of the Action Theatre Conservatory, taught a drama workshop. She used the play "Candles in Our Window" by Janice Cohn, which is a true story of a community in Billings, Mont., that came together to prevent anti-Semitism. Stones were thrown at homes that had Hanukkah candles in their window, so Billings residents lit Hanukkah candles to provide anonymity to Jewish families. This was similar to members of Denmark communities who all wore Jewish stars to prevent Nazis from knowing whom to take to concentration camps.

Students who perform "Candles in Our Window" are taught that they should not retreat when someone is being hurt, Small said.

The workshop concluded with an account of a Holocaust survivor. Maud Dahme, president of New Jersey State Board of Education, was asked to tell her miraculous story to remind teachers why we teach students about the Holocaust, Small said. Dahme's story was about the people who saved her and why we need to give children the courage to stand up when they recognize something is wrong.