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Holocaust educators network at Rutgers

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It was the second day of the Inaugural Mandel Fellows Conference at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, a continuing education gathering for master teachers of the Holocaust, and Denise Coleman of Marlboro managed to buttonhole Stephen Feinberg just outside the open door to a conference room.

“How can we use this conference as a model for other geographic areas?” asked Coleman, a 2001 Mandel Fellow.

“Write a message to all the other Mandels and I’ll send it out to them,” replied Weinberg, director of national outreach education for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. “You begin with a small step.”

In a way, the exchange summed up the mission of the two-day conference — a first, small step toward helping master teachers of the Holocaust to network with each other and share their expertise and educational resources with colleagues from across the country.

The conference brought together 18 graduates of the Mandel Fellows Institute at the museum, a program of continuing education for teachers of the Holocaust who are committed to advancing their own education and to sharing their expertise in their communities. Over the eight years of the program, the museum has graduated 185 Mandel Fellows from 47 states.

The inaugural conference— a nonstop round of workshops, films, lectures, and networking — took place from Feb. 29 to March 1 at the Rutgers University Inn and Conference Center. It was held under the auspices of the museum and the Herbert and Leonard Littman Families Holocaust Resource Center of Rutgers University’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life. The fellows program is funded by a gift from the Cleveland-based Mandel Associated Foundations.

All in all, the conference was “wildly successful,” said Karen Small, associate director of the Bildner Center and coordinator of its community outreach programs.

“What started out as a conversation about a reunion became this two-day conference, bringing together Mandel Fellows from the Mid-Atlantic Region,” she said. “When I first approached the museum with the idea of a reunion that became a conference, they loved the idea, because it helps to bring together an established institution and teachers within a

regional area — so the teachers become aware of the resources of Rutgers and Rutgers becomes more connected to this group of teachers.

“The opportunity to work together with the high level of teachers in this group is really what the Bildner Center sees as an important part of its mission,” Small added. “We’re basically looking to help them build on their experience, but also to create a network. We’re just beginning the conversation about it and very much looking forward to continuing our relationship with the museum.”

As that conversation begins, said Gretchen Skidmore, the goal is to ensure that fellows will have opportunities not only for continuing professional development, but also for a continuing connection with the museum.

“What we hope happens is that they share their knowledge with many teachers in their communities,” said Skidmore, coordinator of national outreach initiatives for the museum and a 1998 Mandel Fellow. “We’d like to use this as a model for fellows throughout the country to come back together and to have these resources. What we hope is to spread the web of the museum.”

The man responsible for first weaving that web is Feinberg, founding director of the Mandel Fellows program.

“I think this is an absolutely wonderful effort,” said Feinberg, adding that he is grateful to the Bildner Center for its support and generosity in hosting the conference.

“This is an example of something starting from the ground up,” he said. “The Mandel Fellows came up with the idea of having this gathering, and it has been absolutely spectacular. The museum will share this experience with all of the Mandel Fellows nationwide, and we will be as supportive for other reunion ideas as we were here.”

As that experience continued to unfold, Feinberg joined the Mandel Fellows in the conference room for *Germany Confronts the Holocaust: Education and Commemoration*, a presentation by William Donahue, a member of the department of Jewish studies and chair of the department of Germanic, Russian, and East European languages and literature at Rutgers.

“My topic today is very broad and, in fact, impossible,” said Donahue. “The only way to make it possible is by putting in ‘2004.’” And with that, he launched into a 90-minute virtual tour of several new Holocaust memorials in Berlin, displaying his digital photographs, one by one, on a screen.

There was Das Jüdische Museum, the Jewish Museum, with its forbidding Holocaust Tower. “It’s isolating, dark, cold,” said Donahue. “It’s to give you some sense of what it’s like to be gradually separated from your contacts.”

There was the Steglitz memorial, a wall of highly polished metal in the heart of a Berlin marketplace, next to a hot dog stand, a memorial that begins with the word “Gedenke” — “Remember” — lists the names and addresses of the Jews deported from that spot, and then ends with the words “und heute?” — “and today?”

And there was the new Holocaust memorial currently under construction in the heart of Berlin — a series of dark and uneven columns set “in the embrace, if you will,” of the city’s central architecture, Donahue told the fellows. “It is stunning, insofar as its location,” he said. “It doesn’t tell the story clearly, but you know the landscape has been interrupted in a powerful way.”

As the conference broke for lunch, a few of the teachers stayed behind to share some thoughts.

Amy Mogland of Somerset, a social studies teacher at the Hillsborough Middle School who was a 1998 fellow, said she had found it inspiring to take part in the conference.

“The number one reason is to share the knowledge and listen to my fellow colleagues,” she said. “It’s fascinating. My main thing was hearing what’s going on now but also what we can do in the future to share this research and network more.”

Denise Coleman, a fifth-grade teacher in Marlboro, noted that she had participated in planning the conference. “We wanted to get an opportunity for the meeting of the minds, to see how the Mandel program can move forward,” she said. “I think it was very successful. We generated a number of wonderful ideas.”

Added Jill Cerqueira, a high school history teacher in Holmdel, “It’s revitalizing my spirit — being able to meet with colleagues, sharing ideas, and having a better opportunity to coordinate our efforts.

“We’re talking about the possibility of long-distance conferencing between regional groups of Mandels,” said Cerqueira, a 1996 fellow. “We’re talking about working with teachers at the museum. So we’re pretty excited. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

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