

Rutgers center launches institute to train teachers in Holocaust studies

by Marilyn Silverstein
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Rutgers University's Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life has launched New Jersey's first Master Teacher Institute in Holocaust Education.

Funded through the center's Herbert and Leonard Littman Families Holocaust Resource Center, the institute is designed to offer middle school and high school teachers an in-depth understanding of the Holocaust and its impact on today's world.

Twenty-nine master teachers representing every part of the state have committed themselves to participating in the two-year program. They will receive professional development credits for attending the institute, with the option of completing extended course work in order to receive graduate credits.

The new institute represents a new direction for the Bildner Center, according to associate director Karen Small. "It's a two-year commitment of the Bildner Center to these teachers, as well as the teachers' commitment to us," she said. "That's really important. It shows that continuity of education and continuity of contact can really make a significant difference in teaching. Their willingness to commit to this type of program really shows the strength of their interest."

Serving on the faculty for the institute are Yael Zerubavel, founding director of the Bildner Center, and Jeffrey Shandler, associate professor of Jewish studies at Rutgers. Hanna Yablonka, associate professor in the department of Jewish history at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, is scholar-in-residence for the course. Colleen Tambuscio, a special education teacher at New Milford High School in Bergen County and founding president of the Council of Holocaust Educators, will assist the teachers in translating what they learn into suitable lessons for the classroom.

"This is a major commitment by the Bildner Center, through the Littman center, to offer something more extensive and methodical in terms of teacher education," said Zerubavel as she sat in a conference room at the center in New Brunswick.

"I have tremendous admiration and respect for these people who have made a commitment to come to Rutgers for two years," she said, indicating the teachers who were assembling in the room for the institute's opening lecture. "The idea is they will become the resource people in their schools and help other teachers. The idea, of course, is to provide an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the Holocaust and its implications for issues of genocide that arise now in other areas.

"I'm really very happy," Zerubavel added. "This is something we had in mind for a couple of years, and to see it happening and to see the excitement of the teachers is very exciting."

One teacher who shares that excitement is Marian Felderbaum, a seventh-grade social studies teacher at the Linwood Middle School in North Brunswick. “I really am here to enhance my knowledge,” Felderbaum said. “It’s a base of knowledge, and it’s a chance to work with colleagues and to learn how to implement better for my students what knowledge there is. It’s very awesome.”

Artist Dorene Schwartz-Weitz of Highland Park, a humanities and art teacher in the Freehold Regional School District, said she was there to learn and to network. “There are wonderful things happening, and I want to be part of an ongoing educational program,” said Schwartz-Weitz, who initiated the Portraits of Survivors project at Howell High School last year.

“I would like to continue working on Portraits of Survivors and to work together with people who are interested in *tikun olam* — fixing the world,” she said. “This is the way to do it.”

Jason Bing Schetelick, superintendent of the Great Meadows Regional School District in Warren County, said he was there to build on all he has learned while studying as a Sister Rose Thering fellow at Seton Hall University. “I thought it would be a great way to turn the key on current resources for our staff,” he said.

The study of the Holocaust has always been of personal and professional interest to him, added Schetelick, who described himself as a Jewish “halfie” — the son of intermarried parents. “I’m looking forward to networking and getting resources for our [grades] five through eight teachers to use in the classroom,” he said. “I think this will be a great topic for our district to explore.”

As teachers take up that material, the first and most compelling reason to teach it is simply that it works educationally, said author/scholar Michael Berenbaum as he keynoted the opening session with a lecture, Why Teach the Holocaust?

“One of the exciting things we have as teachers when we teach this material is that we have a manifest agenda,” said Berenbaum, director of the Sigi Ziering Institute: Exploring the Ethical and Religious Implications of the Holocaust at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles and former project director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

“The material touches kids in ways we cannot imagine,” he said. “It allows us to raise moral issues not being raised elsewhere in our society, and it may be one of the tools we have to create better human beings.

“You may never know the fabulous things you’re doing in touching human lives,” he said. “Why are we teachers? Because when we see a spark in a kid’s eye, that’s what makes us tick. That’s the important thing you undertake when you teach the Holocaust.”