

# Diversity training held in slain reporter's honor

At E. Brunswick shul, sharing stories of a changing state



Robin Parker, executive director of Beyond Diversity Resource Center, conducts an exercise during a teachers' diversity workshop on Oct. 16.

Photos by Debra Rubin

by [Debra Rubin](#)  
NJN Bureau Chief/Middlesex

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On a day dedicated to remembering a journalist slain because he was an American Jew, educators from across the state came together in East Brunswick to learn what they could do to stop hate.

At a diversity workshop held Oct. 16 at Temple B'nai Shalom, teachers heard lectures, shared ideas, and viewed a documentary about a coffee cooperative in Uganda farmed by Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

The teachers in attendance came from parochial and public schools from Atlantic to Bergen counties.

The synagogue's nonprofit Daniel Pearl Education Center is named after the *Wall Street Journal* reporter murdered in 2002 by Pakistani terrorists. It is dedicated to developing the tolerance and understanding that Pearl cherished.

Jews are not alone in suffering history's bigotry and bias, said Andrew Boyarsky, chair of the center's board, in an address to the educators. "They are a human thing. You can and will make a difference just by being here today."

In a letter they asked be read to the teachers, Daniel's parents, Judea and Ruth Pearl of Encino, Calif., noted that Daniel's great-grandparents were murdered at Auschwitz because they were Jewish.

"The tragedy of Daniel Pearl reminds us that these forces did not die in Europe in 1945; they are dangerously active today and must be fought by education, vigilance, and timely response," the Pearls wrote, adding that the teachers' presence "is so valuable as education is an act of defiance against the forces of barbarity and inhumanity."



Ellen Friedland of JEM/GLO, a Montclair-based nonprofit production company, talks about *A Delicious Peace Grows in a Ugandan Coffee Bean*, her film about Jewish, Christian, and Muslim farmers in Africa, as NJ Commission on Holocaust Education executive director Paul Winkler looks on.

The program was also sponsored by the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education, the Herbert and Leonard Littman Families Holocaust Resource Center at Rutgers University, and St. Bartholomew's School in East Brunswick.

Commission executive director Paul Winkler spoke of the growing diversity of the state and the resultant challenges. "We have 168 languages spoken in the state of New Jersey," he said. "We are number two in the country in diversity. What wonderful diversity we have. But we are also number two in something else: hate crimes.

"Diversity and hate crimes. It doesn't seem to go together."

Part of the problem, said Winkler, is that New Jersey also is one of the most segregated states in its housing and schools. “We are fourth from the bottom, and that is not a good distinction.”

He said his own brother, a guidance counselor in Atlantic City, has often complained about the failure of his minority students to have any contact with students from the surrounding upscale white suburbs.

“Why can’t the kids from Ventnor do something with them — go to the zoo together?” asked Winkler. “We believe kids learn not just with their heads, but with their hearts.”

Trish Roemer, a sixth-grade math and social studies teacher at Robert Treat Academy in Newark, said she formed just such a relationship with one of the city’s last synagogues, Ahavas Sholom, and its president Eric Freedman. Students from her charter school went on a class trip to visit the synagogue.

“I tried to teach them about the Holocaust, but they were a little confused,” she said.

At the synagogue her students “all wore yarmulkes” and gained an understanding of Judaism. They also met with a Holocaust survivor.

### **Developing connections**

Raya Benhaim, a native of Israel who teaches Hebrew at Moshe Aaron Yeshiva High School in South River and at the religious school of the Marlboro Jewish Center, said she was interested in seeing what other educators were doing about learning to communicate with students.

Robin Parker, executive director of the Beyond Diversity Resource Center in Mount Laurel, conducted an exercise in which teachers shared with others how their religion or spirituality formed their outlook and what messages they received as children about whites, Mexicans, and Native Americans.

Parker, the former chief of the Office of Bias Crimes and Community Relations of the state Attorney General’s Office, said people tend to avoid conversations on race, religion, or sexual orientation because it makes them uncomfortable.

He said instilling respect for others, taking personal responsibility for actions, and developing a connection and responsibility toward the larger world is crucial to bringing about change.

“When people begin to interact with each other prejudice tends to be reduced,” said Parker. “When people talk laterally to each other they reduce prejudice.”

Joan Rivitz, commissioner the state Commission on Civil Rights, said that as the daughter of Holocaust survivors she is “passionate” about human and civil rights.

“We have to take the lessons of the past and apply them to the present,” she said.