

## **Imparting the 'bigger picture'**

**Local teachers complete Bildner Center's Holocaust education program**

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Burdened by daily lesson plans and curriculum objectives, "it's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture," explained Victoria Formato, a 9th-12th grade teacher at Arthur L. Johnson School in Clark who teaches Holocaust and genocide studies there.

But, for the past two years, Formato gathered in New Brunswick with 19 of her colleagues from across the state once every several weeks. Together, they learned from prominent Holocaust scholars as part of the second class of the Master Teacher Institute in Holocaust Education.

"Everyone here is passionate about the subject matter, and it's contagious," said Formato, one of the 20 educators honored on May 12 for their completion of the two-year program sponsored by The Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life at Rutgers University and largely funded through a grant by the Claims Conference.

"If nothing else, it gives us a passion for what we do," she added.

Over the course of the program, the teachers -- hailing from elementary through high schools, public and private, and spanning disciplines from history to music to special education -- trained in the history of the Holocaust as well in the pedagogy of teaching this complex and multifaceted subject.

Each of the program's three semesters focused on a specific theme. Spring of 2009 dealt with key dates of the Holocaust, including discussions on Kristallnacht by New York University scholar Marion Kaplan, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising by Samuel Kassow of Trinity College, and the Wannsee Conference by Roni Stauber of Tel-Aviv University.

The fall of 2009 focused on the survivors, featuring Diane Wolf, a professor at the University of California, Davis who has written about child Holocaust survivors in post-war Holland and Douglas Greenberg, a historian and the executive dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers who as the former executive director of the Shoah Foundation oversaw the recording of thousands of Holocaust survivors and other witnesses.

The last semester centered on the legacy of the Holocaust and its relation to other genocides with presentations by Harry Reicher of the University of Pennsylvania Law School on the Holocaust's role in shaping the post-war Human Rights Movement and Alex Hinton of Rutgers University, Newark on the Cambodian genocide, among others.

"It's so rewarding to have that kind of dialogue -- to have the renowned professors from all around the country come to us," Lisa Varley, a second grade teacher at Aldrich Elementary School in Howell, told The Jewish State.

With the teachers and the scholars engaged in the subject matter, the program often ran over the allotted time, observed Jeffrey Shandler, professor of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University and the program's academic advisor.

"One of the most gratifying things for me is that several presenters stayed longer than they intended to, to stay for the lively discussion and had to miss a train or two back home," Shandler told the audience.

In addition to the seminars, the teachers also completed projects that they then introduced into their own classrooms.

Stephanie Abelson, for example, who teaches English as a second language (ESL) at Howell Middle School North, created an interactive Web unit on the Holocaust and World War II.

The Web site, she explained, not only engages the students on the subject matter but also provides an archive of their progress in English language proficiency.

Dr. Paul Winkler, the executive director of the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education, said the program "is impacting education in general, impacting how educators should teach, and how education should take place in New Jersey."

The program's strength, Winkler noted, is how the teachers bring what they learn in the monthly seminars back to their respective schools.

"This program took it one step further -- let's learn, let's really know the information, but then let's utilize it, let's put it into place," he said.

At the ceremony, Omer Bartov, a professor at Brown University, delivered a lecture on Holocaust historiography and recent developments in the field.

Bartov noted that in the war's immediate aftermath people spoke in terms of "mass murder," "atrocities," or "camps."

"It's important to remember that initially the term Holocaust did not exist, and the whole notion of writing a history of the Holocaust did not exist," he said.

Bartov referenced the functionalist versus intentionalist debate among Holocaust historians. The former camp is interested in what structures of the state led to genocide and the latter focuses on the ideology and intent of the perpetrators, and by extension of the stories of the victims.

Early histories of the Holocaust often occupied the functionalist camp, whereas more recent ones typically are the latter, Bartov explained.

Over the past 15 years, there has been "a moderation of views on both sides," Bartov said. While most historians today agree that intent is important, it is also clear that the bureaucratic nature of the modern nation-state partly contributed to how a policy of genocide was carried out.

"Not all the people involved were driven by radical ideology, but of the function of the modern state," he said. "They were being law-abiding citizens, following what they were told to do."

Another development in the field includes a focus on the Holocaust and the economy. Several historians, Bartov said, have recently shown how the Nazi policy of mass extermination of Jews was in fact a profitable endeavor for the Germans and served to further their colonialist aims across the continent. Holocaust historians are also increasingly interested in local histories and how the Holocaust played out on the ground in small towns across Eastern Europe, he added.

These local histories, Bartov said, produce a "more complex and more disturbing" picture of the Holocaust since the Germans often capitalized on local ethnic strife to fulfill their genocidal aims.

"On the local level, genocide looks very different, like communal massacres," Bartov said.