Teachers bring survivors’ narratives into lesson plans

By DEBRA RUBIN
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THIRTY-FOUR TEACHERS from across the state came to Rutgers University on Oct. 10 to participate in an annual program presented by Herbert and Leonard Littman Holocaust Resource Center of the Bildner Center.

This year’s program, “Individuals Matter: Personal Narratives in Response to the Nazi Threat,” was taught by Rebecca Erbelding, historian and curator at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Colleen Tambuscio, the center’s pedological consultant and founding president of the Council of Holocaust Educators of the New Jersey Education Association.

After an interactive presentation, the teachers broke into small groups to discuss key concepts and how they might be implemented in classrooms.

Tambuscio, a teacher at New Milford High School, said “one piece my kids absolutely fall apart on is the public shaming,” because of their experiences with bullying.

Michael Garry, a U.S. history and global studies teacher at Donald Payne Vocational-Technical High School in Newark, said he incorporates personal narratives of those who did extraordinary things in World War II into his curriculum.

He said his students, who are all minorities, are “absolutely sympathetic” to Holocaust victims.
“They can’t understand how mankind can treat mankind so cruelly,” said Garry, who often relates what he is teaching to contemporary politics.

Jonathan Hunt and Andrea Turner both teach seventh-grade social studies at John Witherspoon Middle School in Princeton. Hunt said he attended the workshop because he was interested in teaching about American involvement in rescuing Jews during the Holocaust.

Turner said that for her students, learning about the Holocaust is “very shocking,” even though many come to seventh grade with some prior knowledge of the event.

Phyllis Pollak, who teaches at the New Road School in Parlin, a school for students with disabilities aged between 5 and 21 years old, coordinates the annual Holocaust project at her school. As part of the project, the students visit Chabad House at Rutgers where they put on a presentation for college students about that year’s Holocaust project and leave a display.

“What they can understand and what I focus on are child survivors of the Holocaust,” and those who helped rescue them, she said.

Speaking about the annual Holocaust education program, Pollak said, “I’ve been coming here now for 10 years and every year I learn something new.”

She added, “I always try to teach in a positive manner. I always tell my students the Jewish people survived because of goodness and people’s help.”

Michelle Eddelston, a history teacher at Neptune High School, is also a regular at Bildner’s Holocaust programs and brings her students to the annual school group screening that is part of the Bildner-sponsored Rutgers Jewish Film Festival. This year’s selection, “A Bag of Marbles,” about two French brothers sent by their parents to the French countryside to escape the Holocaust, will be shown Nov. 1 at the AMC Loews 18 in New Brunswick. Holocaust survivors will speak after the film.