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Student Awareness Day ‘inspiring’ and ‘moving’ for participants

By Sergio Carmona

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Holocaust survivor Ibi Schneider speaks to students about her experiences at a Student Awareness Day in Fort Lauderdale. (Mike Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

More than 600 high school students from 17 schools throughout South Florida heard from Holocaust survivors and other speakers at a Student Awareness Day in Fort Lauderdale.

Student Awareness Day is a prejudice reduction and anti-bullying program presented by the Holocaust Documentation & Education Center in Dania-Beach. For these days, Holocaust survivors share their stories with local students.

The Student Awareness Day that took place at Greater Fort Lauderdale / Broward County Convention Center was the HDEC's second in-person one since the COVID-19 pandemic began more than two years ago. In addition to the students and approximately 40 Holocaust survivors and second generation survivors, facilitators, volunteers and community leaders were also in attendance.



Holocaust survivor Gerald Hertz speaks to students about his experiences at a Student Awareness Day in Fort Lauderdale. (Mike Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

The event took place on *Yom HaShoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day), and featured guest speakers Amy Spitalnick, a granddaughter of Holocaust survivors who is the executive director of Integrity First for America, which recently won its groundbreaking lawsuit against the hate groups responsible for the Unite the Right violence, securing multi-million dollar judgments on behalf of the Charlottesville community members; senior political television reporter and columnist Michael Putney, who interviewed Spitalnick on stage; and Howard Finkelstein, former public defender of Broward County.

Rositta E. Kenigsberg, HDEC's president, described Spitalnick as someone who is "an incredible example of making a difference in our world today."

"I really felt her presentation and the way Michael asked the questions was probably one of the most important moments of the day, as was Howard Finkelstein's," Kenigsberg said. "We had Howard close out the day with the message of what the students' responsibility is, but with Amy, the students saw someone closer to their age explain why she did what she did, why it was important, what the implications were and what the lessons are."

Kenigsberg continued, "Her presentation also touched on the fact that democracy should not be taken for granted."

"She also explained to the students they will also be of age to vote, and they have a responsibility for the future," she noted. "You can't sit idly back and do nothing and then complain."

Spitalnick explained what she hopes people took away from her talk.

"We're living in a time when it feels like there are deep disturbing parallels to history, and while there are many differences, we also have to be keenly aware about the fact that the very same hate that claimed much of my family's lives is resurgent around the world, including right here in the United States," she said. "It's crucial that we understand the reality of that and that so many communities, not just Jewish people, are under attack right now. You have to look at the most recent statistics."

Spitalnick said she was heartened by the feedback to her talk, particularly from the Holocaust survivors.

"My grandparents survived, but they passed away two decades ago, so being with survivors and having them be part of that conversation as they shared their stories with the students and talked with me afterwards about how

gratified they are to hear about our work and how it connects with their own stories is one of the most meaningful things I can do,” she said.



Amy Spitalnick, a granddaughter of Holocaust survivors who is the executive director of Integrity First for America, is interviewed by Michael Putney during the Holocaust Documentation & Education Center's Student Awareness Day in Fort Lauderdale. (Photo By Howie Sonnenschein)

Holocaust survivor Ibi Schneider of Miami, who shared her experiences with the students, said, “I hope the students don’t forget what I shared with them.”

Kenigsberg said what survivors’ contributions to the Student Awareness Days is “life-changing and life-inspiring.”

Kimberly Coombs, the School District of Palm Beach County’s K-12 Holocaust studies program planner, said, “Being able to attend HDEC Student Awareness Day in-person was very impactful for the students and teachers of Palm Beach County that were able to attend.”

“This event is important because students have the unique opportunity to engage with a Holocaust survivor in a small group setting and they can individualize the atrocities of the Holocaust,” Coombs continued. “They see how each survivor and every victim had a life and a family before the war.”

Coombs added, “They also learn how each one of us can make a difference and why we must each stand up to hate.”

“The students heard that they can change things and they can help make the world a better place by leading with love,” she noted. “Hearing the students speak at the end of the event about the impact that the day had on them was so moving. One student so eloquently said, ‘It is so much easier to love than to hate. Hate weighs you down and love lifts you up.’ She saw that the survivors that were there were an inspiration to the world.”



Students and Holocaust survivors take part in a Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) commemoration during a Student Awareness Day in Fort Lauderdale. (Mike Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Kenigsberg explained the significance of the Student Awareness Day taking place on *Yom HaShoah*.

“For those students who never observed or had any experience knowing anything about the annual Days of Remembrance, I don’t think they will ever forget about it from here on,” she said. “We had a lighting ceremony as we asked everybody to turn their flashlights on their phones, and we had this phenomenal cantorial soloist named Evelyn Goldfinger from Beth Torah [Benny Rok Campus in North Miami Beach].”

Visit hdec.org for more information on the center.