

PC Community Creates Unique Holocaust Awareness Day

by Emily Torgan

Jewish Community Reporter

Something was very different about the student gathering in the Slavin Center at Providence College on Dec. 2.

Despite the bright weather and colorful signs advertising a student-sponsored event, faces were somber and the mood subdued.

The signs, made with magic markers, advertised "Bearing Witness: A Day of Holocaust Awareness."

The students who created them had just completed a shocking new academic experience. By organizing Holocaust

Awareness Day, they shared some of their knowledge with the college community.

Working as a group, the 26 students who had participated in the first-ever offering of "Gender and Genocide: A Study of Holocaust Literature," a semester-long course designed and taught by English professor Jane Lunn Perel, created a daylong tribute to those directly affected by the horrors.

With the help of co-sponsors Pax Christi, an on-campus pastoral organization, the Board of Multicultural Student Affairs, the Feinstein Institute for Public Service and the Rhode Island Holocaust Memorial Museum, students put together a program based on the course materials.

Beginning at 10 a.m., partici-

pants offered slide and picture displays and film clips. Beth Cohen, educational director of the Rhode Island Holocaust Memorial Museum, presented material from her institution.

Recordings of music from the Vilna ghetto were played, and later, students Liz Benson and Joseph Sustar performed live Hebrew and Yiddish music inspired by "Gender and Genocide."

Between 1:30 and 2:30 p.m., a silent group of about 50 students listened as Holocaust survivor Lea Eliash told them about her years as a Jewess in Nazi-occupied Lithuania.

Students also heard the Rev. Edward Doyle, O.P., a former Providence College faculty member who had served as an army chaplain during the liberation of the concentration camps.

After students presented their own writings, the activities ended at 4:30 p.m. at which time Perel performed an exhibition Shabbat ceremony.

By then, about 150 students had attended the function.

According to Perel and her students, gaining the knowledge to put together Holocaust Awareness Day made a tremendous impact on their thinking and emotional lives.

"I've changed from this course," said Kimberly Stram, a senior majoring in English. "I've

had to deal with the guilt of not knowing about this, and of not caring enough to know why it happened. It's been an awakening. I feel like I need to do more socially."

"I was horrified by this class," said Mike Mercurio, a senior English major. "It's given me a great awareness of how our culture deals with 'otherness.' It's not only the way that Jews are portrayed as 'the other,' but any way our society portrays somebody as being the other."

Perel, who has taught English at Providence College for 25 years, decided to design a Holocaust literature course for her students after working with a single student interested in Holocaust literature.

"We became interested in the different experiences of men and women during the Holocaust," said Perel, who also teaches women's studies. "I realized a lot of studies about the differences between male and female experiences are going on. The male experience was universalized because more of the men became professional writers, and the canon became male-dominated."

Perel, who is Jewish and a poet, was drawn to the self-exploratory aspects of the works. She began to plan a class in 1994, and the English department approved it a year later.

Perel created a heavy syllabus featuring the works of both male and female writers, including Elie Wiesel, Gerda Weiss-

mann Klein, Nelly Sachs, Primo Levy, Paul Celan and more.

The list of required works also includes instructions about how to cope with the emotional aspects of such readings.

"We will have to create democratic strategies to assist us in reading and reacting to this literature," the syllabus reads.

As both a Jew and an educator, Perel found the notion of presenting the material to her mostly Christian undergraduate students daunting.

"It was frightening," Perel said. "I was aware that I could say anything, and these students would be inclined to accept it. That's why I relied on bringing in people."

Because students said they had become physically and emotionally exhausted by the reading, Perel arranged for Dr. Ann Coleman, a psychologist at Providence College, to come in and talk to class members about the works twice during the semester.

Cantor Ida Rae Cahana of Temple Beth-El in Providence came in and sang partisan songs and songs of grieving. Dr. Elaine Chaika, a professor at Providence College, gave a talk about the history of anti-Semitism and stereotyping specific to the uses of language.

As the class was offered with the Feinstein Institute of Public Service, which requires student involvement in locations outside the classroom, class members went to the Holocaust Museum of Rhode Island, where they heard a survivor; to St. Patrick's school to discuss the material with junior high schoolers; to the Jewish Community Center of Rhode Island, and to a Holocaust film series.

"It was really difficult to deal with," said Liza Pappas, a public service major at the Feinstein Institute, who served as a student coordinator for off-site class projects. "But I learned that there was an untapped strength in each person that helped them get through, not just physically but with hope. And the best way to deal with this is to raise awareness, because if people keep understanding maybe we won't run into this again."



TEACHER ASSISTANT LIZA PAPPAS and her classmates coordinated Holocaust Awareness Day. *Herald photo by Emily Torgan*



PROFESSOR JANE PEREL and her students listened to survivor Lea Eliash on Dec. 2. *Herald photo by Emily Torgan*