



KIDSBRIDGE ANNUAL YOUTH HOLOCAUST GENOCIDE AWARENESS COMPETITION -- 2018

Meet the winners and hear their stories; photo at end

Sarah Miller – 1st Place

Nominated by: Jamie Caputo Getrajman, Eisenhower Middle School

Sarah Miller first became interested in the organization MindLeaps in February 2016 through her synagogue, Barnert Temple, in Franklin Lakes, when she was searching for her “mitzvah project,” as part of her bat mitzvah, which would take place in October 2016. A serious classical ballet dancer, Sarah was intrigued with the mission of MindLeaps, which uses dance as an entry point to the development of a street child’s mind. The mission of MindLeaps is to fully and completely transition underserved youth from a life on the streets to a stable life in school or in the workplace. While MindLeaps was at the time working primarily in three countries (it has since expanded its program to other countries), its focus at the time was addressing the plight of street kids in Rwanda, which number 7,000 in the capital of Kigali mostly due to the horrendous genocide that country suffered in 1994.

Sarah had a meeting with Rabbi Joel Soffin, who is on the board of MindLeaps, and he was impressed with her interest and dedication. He told her, “You could do any of three things for your mitzvah project: raise money, raise awareness, and/or accompany me to Rwanda.” At the age of 12, Sarah immediately said, “I want to go to Rwanda.” He introduced her to Rebecca Davis, founder and president of MindLeaps, who was also impressed, and gave Sarah the green light to go raise money for MindLeaps. For the next year, Sarah worked very hard to raise money and awareness for MindLeaps: she visited her local dance studio and encouraged donations; she spoke to her classmates at school about the organization and her passion; and she met with the principal of her Elementary School, the guidance counselor at her middle school, as well as a representative from the Wyckoff Board of Education, and made presentations to various adults. She eventually raised over \$3,000, for which she was awarded at MindLeaps with the “Sarah Miller Scholarship Fund.” The money she raised helped a street kid named Mugisha graduate from the MindLeaps program, and attend Sonrise [sic] Boarding School. When street kids are able to attend vocational or boarding school and receive a higher education, it is a way to break the cycle of poverty.

Sarah never lost her determination to travel to Rwanda, and the trip was scheduled for February 2017. Accompanied by her mother, Rabbi Joel Soffin and his wife, Sandy Soffin, the group set off for 10 days in Kigali, Rwanda. During that time, Sarah visited the MindLeaps dance studio, meeting all the kids she had heard so much about, and helped teach English and participated in their dance class. She traveled up to Sonrise Boarding School to visit Mugisha and his classmates, several of them also graduates of the MindLeaps program (ever since Sarah began sponsoring Mugisha, MindLeaps has

sent her progress reports on his schoolwork). She also accompanied the Rabbi on his various charitable projects including helping deliver protein-rich meals to a maternity hospital in Kigali, visiting both a chicken cooperative and fabric factory workshop designed to empower women back into the workforce, and visiting over 20 individual widows who lost their families in the Genocide, and whom the Rabbi supports through his charitable organization, Jewish Helping Hands. These women were so appreciative to see a young white teenager who had traveled so far to visit them in their villages and spend time talking to them. She also visited the Genocide Museum in Kigali to learn more about the horrific genocide suffered by the Rwandans.

Since her return to the U.S., Sarah has continued to work on behalf of MindLeaps. She recently raised \$400 for a street kid named Diane, who had graduated from the MindLeaps program but faced no educational future. Thanks to Sarah's efforts, she will now attend vocational school. Sarah has events planned to raise money for additional MindLeaps students, and she has also recently started making an effort to find used PCs for students in Kenya, who, through MindLeaps, are starting off on their educational path.

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Violet Vogel – 2nd Place

Nominated by: Mike Gerber, Social Studies teacher, Mullica Township

“Be the change you wish to see in the world.” - Mahatma Gandhi.

It is not too often you come across a human that embodies this spirit. To overcome the masses, to fight social injustice and to always fly the social banner of truth, even when it would be so easy just to lay it down. History is littered with stories, tales, and epics of great men and women who see to this cause. And we, are ever so grateful. The greatness of one man to overcome a British powerhouse is just as miraculous as a group of survivors who not only experienced the brutality of the Holocaust but lived on to inspire an age of remembrance and truth. These lessons, both by the living and the deceased, have touched our hearts, our minds, and our souls.

The student I would like to nominate is Violet Vogel. From the outside, Violet may seem like your average American teen. Tall, blonde hair, blue eyed, personable young woman. However, Violet is far from your average American teen. She is passionate, inquisitive, just, empathetic and wise beyond her years. I've had the pleasure of teaching Violet for the past four years. Each and every day during our time, she would continually impress me with her knowledge, creativity and abilities. However, it wasn't until about three months ago (when our course entered the 1930's historically) that I became aware and

completely blown away with her passion towards the Holocaust. As I soon came to find out, Violet was flying her own social banner of Holocaust truth in and around our school as well as participating in a plethora of related events.

- ❖ Violet has had strong relationships with multiple Holocaust survivors since she was a little girl. In particular, Ernest Paul, Laura Paul and Fred Spiegel, all survivors. What makes Violet truly special is the deep care that she has for each of these survivors. She listens and asks questions, and throughout the years, she has asked to read each of their memoirs so that she could better understand how the Holocaust had affected their lives.
- ❖ Violet has attended many Holocaust Remembrance events at Stockton. She is not just a passive observer. She is wholly engaged by the content and emotion of the events.
- ❖ She has sought out and met Michael Berenbaum on two separate occasions. (He is the world's foremost Holocaust scholar.)
- ❖ She has decided to study German so that she can read original documents if her life takes her in that direction.
- ❖ Violet has also attended a remembrance ceremony for the Armenian Genocide.
- ❖ Violet has joined her mother, Dr. Judith Vogel (Coordinator for Holocaust and Genocide studies) in talks with her course (twice), local synagogues and community centers, and a film and exhibit called "Violins of Hope."
- ❖ There have been at least 5 separate incidences at school where she has combated hateful words and actions. She is strong in her beliefs that this is wrong.
- ❖ She has addressed students directly and has asked for the opportunity to meet with the students with an administrator present to express how these remarks make her feel.

Even though her mother warned her she could become a target, she responded, "Mama, this is important, and I don't mind being a target if what I'm doing is right."

As you can see, Violet is passionate about Holocaust education. She is an amazing little girl with a big heart and a big voice. After returning home from a trip to the National Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C and witnessing ***Daniel's Story***, Violet vowed, "It was then I decided that nothing would stop me from making sure that the Holocaust would be honored, that never again would I let someone get away with saying a hateful Holocaust-associated word in vain." And this is exactly what she is doing.

It is with great honor and pride that I nominate Violet Vogel for the 2018 Youth Holocaust/Genocide Awareness Award.

She has become the voice of reason to classmates when it wasn't the popular decision to make. She has become the torch bearer of truth for the next generation. She has become the change I wish to see in our society. The change that not many teachers come across.

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Shamai Bernstein – 3rd Place

Nominated by: Stephen Lillis, fifth grade teacher at Milnes Elementary School

To commemorate **National Holocaust Remembrance Day**, students were invited to share personal thoughts or family histories surrounding the Holocaust. Shamai Bernstein, a fifth grader, brought in and shared the memoir of his grand uncle, Samuel Finkelstein. Before Shamai came to the front of the class I spoke to the students. I reminded them about the lessons we had had concerning bullying and bullies. I explained that at a certain time in history an entire country was run by bullies. I said that we were going to explore that today with a first hand, primary source.

Shamai came to the front of the class. His opening remarks astounded me. To paraphrase he said, “To say that the Nazis were bullies is a gross understatement, to say that genocide is bullying is also an understatement, The Nazis were part of a movement to commit genocide and to kill a race.” (I certainly meant no disrespect in my introduction. I wanted to use phrases, terms or situations the other children may have been familiar with.) Shamai began to read. The memoir recounts how Samuel and his family were living in Poland in 1939 and, how, after the Nazi invasion they attempted to flee to the east. Shamai read the hand written account as the students in the class hung on every word. Eventually Samuel was captured by the Nazis and sent to Mauthausen Concentration Camp. The memoirs portray life in the camp. It tells about how, one day the prisoners woke to find no guards. How rumors were spreading that the Americans were on the way. Fortunately, Samuel was not murdered and survived to tell his story. The students had many questions for Shamai. Shamai had remarkable insightful answers.

Through Shamai’s retelling the students began to see another side of the genocide that had occurred. They saw a more personal side, a side that touched one of their own classmates. I believe that each child in that classroom walked away with a much greater understanding. Shamai made them understand that if it can happen to Samuel, it can happen to anyone of us.

The afternoon after Shamai gave his presentation I did some investigating into Mauthausen Concentration Camp. In an uncanny coincidence, I found that it had been liberated by General Patton’s Third Army. My father was in Patton’s Third and did liberator concentration camps during World War II. My father has long passed but I can’t help but think that, at one time, my father and Shamai’s grand uncle may have crossed paths. My father never talked about the camps but many times reminded that we can never forget what happened there.

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(Photo, from L to R): Lawrence Glaser, Exec Director of NJ Commission for Holocaust Education; Mike Gerber, Social Studies teacher, Mullica Township, nominator for Violet Vogel (2nd place winner); Sarah Miller, Eisenhower MS (1st place winner); Shamai Bernstein (3rd place winner) and nominator Stephen Lillis, fifth grade teacher at Milnes Elementary; Lynne Azarchi, Executive Director of Kidsbridge; (missing is Sarah Miller's nominator Jamie Caputo Getrajman)

Congratulations
to all our entrants and winners!

Kidsbridge hopes you will continue your good work.