

Days of Remembrance, A Worthy Cause

David Jacobson, treasurer of Days of Remembrance, along with board member Cliff Rieders, were present at the meeting of the Williamsport Area School District Board of Directors held the 11th of July 2023. The members present and the solicitor listened politely and with interest to the appeal designed to encourage involvement in this important program. David Jacobson explained the work of the organization and its purpose.

The Days of Remembrance Organization was started, not by members of the Jewish faith, but rather by teachers who taught students on military bases and were shocked to find out that the students knew little or nothing about the Holocaust in which the remainder of European Jews were exterminated by the World War II German regime.

The concept for an essay writing contest was birthed from the belief that the perpetual remembrance of the Holocaust would be well served by a student essay writing contest for grades 7 through 12. This program is now ongoing in nine counties in Pennsylvania: Clinton, Columbia, Lycoming, Montour, Northumberland, Snyder, Sullivan, Tioga, and Union.

Prizes range from \$500 for first place, \$250 for second place, \$150 for third place, and \$100 honorable mention.

Many businesses and individuals provide the funds necessary for this 501(c)(3). There are no paid administrative or staff in connection with the Days of Remembrance Program, and all those who grade the submissions work for free. The many submissions are read by educational instructors on the college level.

Days of Remembrance is a 501(c)(3).

Why should school districts encourage participation in the essay writing contest?

- Historical understanding of the causes and consequences of genocide.
- Counters bigotry by teaching about the ultimate consequences of bigotry.
- Teaches ethics: questions about human behavior, moral responsibility, the role of individuals and institutions facing injustice.
- Critical thinking: there is no single explanation for the Holocaust. Writing about the Holocaust requires research and analysis.
- Remembrance: we bear witness to the suffering with the goal of preventing a future atrocity.
- Students can win money.

Days of Remembrance is a member of the Association of Holocaust Organizations and has been sponsored by 16 local military organizations, religious groups, and

businesses. The Days of Remembrance essay contest is in its fifth year. \$12,700 has already been awarded to contest participants.

It is key that teachers in any department within a high school or middle school encourage participation in this program. Research and writing are important learning experiences for students. The essay program encourages critical skill and determines not only how students will look at the Holocaust, but how they will regard other at-risk citizens as well.

Rieders pointed out that his own children have attended public schools in Williamsport. On one occasion Kaila Rieders noted outside her classroom window the Nazi emblem, a Swastika, which someone had placed during a snowfall. When a teacher and other students saw it, they all went outside and destroyed the symbol. This demonstrates not only the horrors of those infused with Nazi mentality, but also the tremendous goodwill of others willing to be brave in the face of unacceptable behavior.

In speaking of the Holocaust, Rieders explained that his mother's entire family, except for a grandparent and her brother, were murdered in the Holocaust. They were born and lived in Poland. It was explained that when the awards were given to students in Montoursville, a PowerPoint was presented to 135 students. The students stayed much longer than the 45 minutes allotted to the PowerPoint program. Some of the students stayed for as long as an hour and 45 minutes. Not a word was spoken by students who listened attentively to the information and PowerPoint but those students asked extremely thoughtful and sometimes provocative questions.

The subject of the Holocaust is extremely powerful and is of relative recent origin in terms of the timeline of history. It teaches an eternal lesson about man's inhumanity to man, but also about the ability to sustain, recover, and to thrive as to those survivors and the community in general.

United States Supreme Court Justice David Souter, nominated for the Court by President George H.W. Bush, is famously remembered for a remark he made in Philadelphia when asked what is the most important job of a Supreme Court Justice. Justice Souter responded that what the law is all about is "how we treat other people." The lesson of the Holocaust is the same; it is about how we treat other people.

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