The Arts: Memory Has a Home in Queens

Randi Sherman

For students and locals, historians and survivors, the recently opened Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Resource Center and Archives is a valuable addition to New York's most ethnically diverse borough.

Atop a hill on the campus of Queensborough Community College in Bayside, Queens, next to the administration offices, sits a building with an architectural design that stands out among those around it. The buildings surrounding the new structure are testaments to an older style, boxy stone piles imposing on their environment. The new structure, of steel, glass and tan limestone, allows the world around it in.

The walls facing you on arrival at the Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Resource Center and Archives are glass; jagged panes in a cube to the right, neat rows of panes to the left. From an outside balcony, the main exhibition space inside is clearly visible.

The only remnant of the building's past is a seam in the floor near the entrance, marking where a loading dock used to be; the presses from Queensborough Community College's former printing office have been replaced by paintings, sketches, artifacts, videotapes and books. The old space has found new life, disseminating knowledge of the Holocaust to New York's most ethnically diverse borough and beyond.

The new center (718-281-5770; www.qcc.cuny.edu), which was officially opened to the public in October 2009, is a far cry from its former home in the basement of Queensborough's library. What started as a single class at the school in 1983 has expanded to include video and book libraries, community and school programming and events, an internship program as well as semester-long art exhibits and a permanent exhibit on the Holocaust. Approximately 200 visitors walk through the doors each month, in addition to an equal number of students who come to the center to do research for classes on and off campus.

After funding for the center was secured two and a half years ago, Queensborough's President Eduardo Marti asked Arthur Flug, executive director of the internship program, what he envisioned for the future of the center. "I want you to design the Holocaust Center so when people say 'I'm going to the Holocaust Center,' the [follow-up question is] Washington or Bayside?"

The center's benefactors were residents of Queens. Kenneth Kupferberg, a physicist, worked with his twin brother, Max, on the Manhattan Project. His
wife, Harriet, was a retired teacher and a member of the QCC Fund Board. Together they were founding members of Temple Beth Sholom in Flushing. Kenneth died in 1993 and Harriet in 2008, one year after she donated $1 million to build the center.

The newest part of the building, designed by Charles Thanhauser of Tek Architects, is a large enclosure that houses the center's permanent exhibit, a series of movable kiosks and wall-mounted video stations that chronicle the plight of Jews during Hitler's reign. The irregularly shaped glass panels of the walls evoke the shattered glass of Kristallnacht; the balcony outside and some of the inside walls are Jerusalem stone, at Harriet Kupferberg's insistence. The centerpiece is a Torah from the town of Czestochowa in southern Poland, donated to the college in 1988. The Torah, itself a survivor of the Holocaust, serves as a symbol of the indestructibility of the Jewish people, Flug says.

Inside the Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Resource Center and Archives / Courtesy of the Queensborough Community College

Images of life before the Holocaust are projected along one of the stone walls: family photos, portraits, street scenes of people shopping, a little girl with a tiny sewing machine. The kiosks hold artifacts and tell stories of Jews in war-torn Europe, with diary entries, photographs, Jewish ritual objects and Nazi memorabilia. One kiosk includes an anecdote from Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld, of the nearby Young Israel of Kew Gardens Hills, a story of small, kind acts in face of great terror. At the age of 14 in 1940, Schonfeld was getting ready to board a train in Austria just as a customs officer searched his bags. The officer found his tefillin, a bar mitzva gift, and threw them in the garbage, telling him he won't need them anymore, and Schonfeld began to cry. Once he boarded the train, the conductor approached him. Having seen Schonfeld crying, he realized how important they must be and had dug the tefillin out of the trash to return them. Another kiosk tells the story and displays the drawings of an American Jewish soldier, Nathan Hilu, assigned to guard Nazi war criminals during the Nuremberg Trials in 1946.

"The permanent exhibit leads you from the beginning to the present," said Jane Keibel, a survivor who came to the United States on the S.S. St. Louis in 1940 and currently serves as a docent at the center. "I don't know of anything [outside a museum] that does that, and it's done with real people, people who have a name."

In addition to showing visitors around the exhibits, Keibel talks to groups about the Holocaust. "It's important for people to know what happened, when so many people are denying it," she said. "Queensborough students are very diverse, and so many come from countries where genocide took place."

Flug is quick to point out that the new center's success is due in great part to the survivors, like Keibel, living in the community, who give of their time and
themselves for the program.

Before the center opened to the public, Flug brought a group of survivors in for a preview. Construction was still incomplete. "They were a bunch of little old men and women in hardhats," Flug said. "And when they got to the main exhibition space, they started crying." They shed tears of joy for the beauty of the building, for the future of the project and for the effect light creates pouring through the glass walls, he recalled. Many of these same survivors are featured in the permanent exhibit, telling pieces of their stories in video.

In August 2009, when the renovations to the building were complete and the vast inventory of 1,200 DVDs and 5,000 books was set to be moved from the library basement, Flug entered the old storage room to find two women, in their eighties and nineties, scrubbing down the shelving units with vinegar, not wanting to bring the dust of the old into the light of the new.

Survivors play many important roles in the center, not the least of which are featured artists. The center is not just of history but of art as well. While past exhibits have ranged from "American Cartoonists: Nazi Germany and the Holocaust" to "The Nanjing Massacre: Genocide and Denial" — with catalogs and traveling exhibits available to any organization for the cost of shipping — the latest exhibit on display is a series of works by Samuel Bak, who was a 6-year-old in Vilna when World War II began. His work, on loan from the Pucker Gallery in Boston through February 1, is a mix of charcoal drawings, pencil sketches, mixed media and watercolor. Those on view "explore landscape, object and person through Bak's themes of loss and the Jewish dictate of tikkun olam," according to the exhibit catalog prepared by Ayala Tamir, the center's assistant director, who also curated the exhibit. One charcoal drawing, Panori, shows a barren land with a Magen David-shaped chasm. A series of watercolors depicts tattered and broken teddy bears.

The woodcuts and paintings of another artist, Rosemarie Koczy, who survived Auschwitz, are also on display. After her death in 2007, her husband donated her haunting works, depicting bald, genderless people cramped in long and narrow spaces.

The center's arts initiative also creates programming open to the wider community, teaching about the Holocaust and social issues through film, music and performing arts. Until five years ago, Queens had no borough-wide commemoration of Kristallnacht. This year, the center marked the day with a concert by Motyl, a group of five female Juilliard graduates, who played music created by survivors and victims. Cantor Moti Fuchs also performed, along with the Hebrew school student and teen choirs from Temple Beth Sholom of Flushing.

"The music comes with the lesson," Tamir said. "We look at it as a way to show our commitment, to attract students and an audience beyond the campus."

The center is dedicated to serving its community of survivors and preventing, through education, such tragedies from repeating themselves. In addition to a "Bagels and Talk" program the center has hosted for four years, a Second Generation group, Yiddish film and Passover Seder programs, the center provides an internship for students to interview Holocaust survivors.

"We have to come up with an approach so [students] look at it as more than history," Flug said. To do this, students in the internship program, most of whom are not Jewish, are paired with a survivor. Some, like a Sri Lankan student two years ago, have never heard of the Holocaust before arriving at the school. Students meet with Tamir, who teaches them about the Holocaust and the art of interviewing. The students approach it initially as reporters, getting the basic information first, leading up to the difficult parts. "We tell them to stop looking at the old guy, to see the boy in front of you," Flug
The survivors are really anxious to tell their stories, according to Flug, since many fear without them, knowledge of the Holocaust will dissipate with future generations.

"Our survivors are not worried about dying, they're worried about being forgotten," Flug said.

Once the stories have been documented, students learn how such discrimination is taking place even today. Students are given information about a case of discrimination and asked to mark its place in history. Leaving out key facts about race, ethnicity and location, they are related this story: Four men are driving in a car when two men in another car cut them off. The two then get out of their car to confront the men in the first car, yelling "Go back where you came from." Most students guess that the event took place during the Holocaust. In fact, it took place in Queens in 2006.

So that the Holocaust remains relevant to students no matter their course of study, the center has taken an interdisciplinary approach to disseminating information, Flug said. In addition to classes specifically teaching the Holocaust, the center works as a supplemental resource for other departments, whether it's providing a biography for an English class examining the human reaction to stressful and dangerous situations; finding research material for nursing classes on medicine and ethics in the Holocaust; exhibiting art as an expression of defiance; or dissecting the economics of the Holocaust, how business was run in Nazi Germany and how the Nazis turned a profit.

Vincent Wheeler, a 22-year-old business administration student and former intern at the center, has been a frequent visitor to the center since the opening. He brings friends periodically, showing it off.

"I just think it's amazing, the look, the ambiance, the technology," he said. "It's absolutely beautiful." His favorite part? "The [interactive] timeline. When you touch it, it tells you what happened that year, with photos and video." He also shows friends the video of him in the interns' reaction display, and the video of the survivor he interviewed, Eddie Weinstein. "My friends, they're enlightened and flabbergasted. They say, 'I can't believe we have this at our college.'"

To keep students aware of the dangers of discrimination in modern life—plaques in one of the center's meeting rooms chronicle genocide from Armenia to Darfur—the center is also involved in creating a curriculum for the New York Department of Education's Hate Crime Initiative. "We don't teach the Holocaust as a lesson in history," Flug said. "We teach [it] as the greatest hate crime ever committed, on a scale never seen before or since."

The curriculum was conceived after a Sikh student in Queens was attacked in 2007. The attackers pulled off his turban and cut off his hair. A press conference was called, and Flug spoke of the need for tolerance, comparing the incident to a photo he showed of an Orthodox man in Poland praying as Nazis cut off his payes.

"I said, 'Let's do something,'" he recalled. "I came up with 'What Do You Do If You're a Victim of a Hate Crime?'" The program, which will offer resources for victims to turn to for help and ideas for prevention, is being created in partnership with the New York State Commission on Hate Crimes, New York State Division of Human Rights and New York Police Department. The curriculum will launch later this year and will eventually be used in schools statewide.

In the meantime, the Kupferberg Center runs community events to promote understanding. After Orthodox Jews harassed a gay student in Queens, Flug
talked the student into going to the police and then approached community leaders to discuss how they wanted to respond. The resulting event, a screening of Trembling Before G-d, a documentary on the struggles of gay Orthodox Jews, at Hillcrest Jewish Center, attracted 180 people.

For now, the center is planning a new year of programming. Flug envisions a "Grandparents Day" in the spring, opening the center to intergenerational groups. He is also working to bring in high school students in need of service credits, hoping to train them to be leaders in identifying hate crimes. Another partnership, with the college's theater program, will result in a new stage version of Anne Frank.

Upcoming exhibit ideas include music in the Holocaust, which would explore the power of music and how it was used. Tamir is currently working out how to incorporate different media with the concept.

Artworks for future display sit in the storeroom waiting to be brought out in the light, for example, paintings by Seymour Kaftan, born in Vilnius, Poland, who in later life painted concentration camp scenes in oil. The storeroom shelves around Kaftan's work continue to fill with past and future exhibits, and nothing is out of bounds. "I never say ‘No, that doesn't fit in our schedule,'" Flug said.