

Miles City Auschwitz Educational Group Project

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for students to hear the words “civil war” in current media or political discussion. Communities across our country are becoming increasingly polarized through a combination of economics, politics, and geography. The polarization of communities breaks our connection with others and creates openings for misinformation and mistrust to flourish. How do we think about and treat people who think, dress, and live differently? What are the long term latent dangers of prejudice and hate? How can we connect to establish and sustain peace? The goal of the Miles City Auschwitz Educational Group Project is to help respond to the aforementioned questions by: A) providing local student leaders with an immersive educational experience about the history of the Holocaust by traveling to Auschwitz, B) guidance on how to process and discuss their experiences at Auschwitz, C) apply that experience to our world today, and D) provide multiple forums for them to share their experiences to help educate and re-shape perspectives to help negate this polarization. Traveling to Auschwitz will give our Miles City students unique insights into how we treat people – how to connect with others with a peaceful and thoughtful approach.

John Tooke, Miles City Rotarian and high school history teacher, played an integral role in enhancing the genocide curriculum in 2017. Mr. Tooke, with the support of the Miles City Rotary Club and various other local clubs and businesses, brought Holocaust survivor and Children of Auschwitz Nazi Deadly Lab Experiments Survivors (CANDLES) co-founder Eva Kor to Custer County District High School (CCDHS, located in Miles City) where she spoke before students and the public. Her message resonated deeply within our community – younger and older generations alike. Students at the high school were curious to know more and Mr. Tooke took that opportunity to further develop the curriculum and stated, “The goal is that when students leave here (CCDHS) they can define genocide, cite examples of it, see the causes of it, and relate it to what they’re seeing in the world today.” After Eva’s visit, he wanted to further foster a connection between CCDHS students and his genocide curriculum, so he organized and an immersive trip that would accomplish just that. In the summer of 2017, he took a group of CCDHS student leaders to Poland to participate in an immersive educational experience with CANDLES Holocaust Museum & Education Center (see attached documentation about the 2019 CANDLES trip, and the below attached student testimonials). Mr. Tooke took a group last summer and has trips planned this summer and next summer!

This immersive experience allows students to learn the lessons of the Holocaust that are being increasingly lost as we move farther away from that era. The Miles City Rotary Club is passionate about helping Mr. Tooke and recognizes the importance and value from these lessons and first-hand experiences. Funds from this grant will help Mr. Tooke furnish scholarships to interested and selected students for the 2020 CANDLES trip. Scholarship recipients will be chosen after submitting an essay to Mr. Tooke and final selection will be approved by a panel of local Rotarians and based on essay content. The scholarships will help

offset the package price, totaling \$4,000 per student. The scholarship recipients will get the opportunity to walk the grounds of Auschwitz, learning first-hand about Eva Kor's moving life story of persecution and survival. Students will experience her powerful message about forgiveness and the role each student can take in connecting to a global community "based on hope, healing, respect, and responsibility" - CANDLES. Students who return from this trip will share their experiences with Rotary, civic organizations, and our local newspapers through presentations and interviews. Additionally, these students will speak up in the classroom and at home with their families and friends about their experiences, sharing their unique perspectives about what they learned and how they can confidently apply that foundational experience directly to issues they face today. This is very powerful sharing and helps students connect to something bigger than themselves, bigger than their community. Each student's unique experience inspires peers, families, and friends to do the same. It helps inspire all generations to connect. To connect with each other in a peaceful and thoughtful approach not only on a local scale, but globally too. Mr Tooke states, "We're trying to better their lives through history."

What lessons in leadership does our generation owe the next generation of leaders? We will all benefit when the next generation of leaders understands that genocide education is about a continuing effort to understand how to treat and connect with our fellow man, and how hate and prejudice burden humanity. As our upcoming RI President Mark Maloney has marked the theme for his presidency, "Rotary Connects the World", and the Miles City Rotary Club hopes to take action by helping provide this powerful immersive educational experience to connect our community to the world.

CCDHS Student Testimonials

Going to Auschwitz made me grow and change as a person over all. I have noticed that I have gained a whole new appreciation for life that I never had before. It is so easy to focus on the things we don't have or think we need. When I got back, I sometimes found myself getting emotional thinking about all the things I have been blessed with in my life. Along with that I learned to be grateful for every second you are alive because you never know when it will be over.

I also feel like I brought Eva's message about forgiveness into action instead of just understanding the message. After talking to Eva on the trip about how to put her message into action, I did what she said and wrote a letter to the person I wanted to forgive about what I wanted to forgive them for. I was amazed at how much better I felt after doing this. Forgiving people is still something I work on to this day, but without the trip would not have been able to do.

I now realize that there is a lot more going on in the world than just what is happening in our small town. There is a whole world with problems and hardships. The only people who can make a difference is you and me. Directing your actions towards helping others is a small step towards improving the world.

- **Ashley D. 2018 Trip Attendee**

Auschwitz changed the way I view others. I now look at people with more love and acceptance instead of being so quick to judge. I am much more open minded and loving when I see people walking down the street, or even towards my friends. Auschwitz also had a kind of unexpected effect on me as well. I am much more willing to speak out and talk in front of groups of people. I think this was more due to the presentations I gave on my experience. Our generation is the last one that will be able to go these places with someone who can tell you what it was like first hand. Walking through the camps and with someone who was actually there gives you an insider look, and an understanding that you can only get from going and seeing these things for yourself.

- **Josie C. 2018 Trip Attendee**

Auschwitz changes you in many ways, but the one way it really impacted me was my perspective on everything. Going to Auschwitz seeing, and experiencing the things you do

makes you very humble. There is not a day that goes by that I am not grateful for the things I have and have got to do. I feel like I have always been a grateful person but after Auschwitz it really does put things into perspective. You realize how easy you really do have it. You will always remember what they went through and how you could have it much worse. They were grateful to have their next meal and we take advantage of that. I will always be thankful for everything after going to Auschwitz.

- **Lynsey C. - 2017 Trip Attendee**

What I learned was that true hate and evil exists in this world. That apathy and tolerance allowed a small number of men to terrorize an entire group of people. That when I hear a politician in the USA call someone a Nazi they have no idea what they're talking about and are doing a great deal of harm. I couldn't help but see a direct correlation between the killing of the Jews and abortion... how the Nazis didn't see them as human and we don't see babies as human.

This trip has made me dig deeper into history... how could people let this happen? How did the Bolshevik revolution influence Poland after the war... how we never want history to repeat itself but unfortunately always will.

- **Mike E. - 2018 Trip Attendee**