

Two Holocaust-Ed Teachers Find That Empathy Is

Often Born of Adversity

Pride and Prejudice in New Jersey

By ADAM SACKS

When New York City transplant Barbara Pordy began teaching Holocaust education in rural southern New Jersey five years ago, she had no idea her job would require instructing parents as well as students.

Pordy, who lost several family members in the Holocaust, was taken aback when a young student asked her what she was doing for the spring holidays. When the girl found out that Pordy was celebrating Passover, not Easter, she stood up and circled her. "Where is your tail? Your horns?" she asked.

Such racist stereotypes are not as prevalent as they once were, yet they still crop up. At a presentation to area parents about her

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Holocaust program, one parent asked Pordy, "When are you going to get over it? You people always exaggerate everything."

But most of her days at the Caroline L. Reutter School in Franklinville find Pordy teaching emotionally disabled fifth- and sixth-graders. She said the children's ghetto narratives from Warsaw and Vilna that she uses as part of her curriculum often enable her students to speak of their own tragedies and abuse.

"These students connect more deeply than regular-education students," Pordy said. "They relate to the suffering and feel different." Having themselves been emotionally and physically abused, "their intensity for learning about the Holocaust is stronger" than any she has ever seen.

Developing a curriculum for her disabled students was no easy task. Pordy wanted to avoid the typical reading of Anne Frank's story, and instead used children's accounts

from the ghettos. She met with resistance when she assigned a historical novel titled "The Upstairs Room" about Dutch Jewish children hiding in an attic. One of her colleagues marched up to the principal and demanded that he require the withdrawal of a chapter titled "Breasts."

The principal responded by entering what was officially considered a "self-contained emotionally disturbed classroom" and took the books from the students' hands. When the superintendent was notified, he asked Pordy to use a marker to blacken out the chapter, then suggested she tear out the pages. When finally asked to remove the books, Pordy suggested, "We could take them all to the middle of the parking lot, burn them, and give the students an example of what happened in Nazi Germany." The book was part of the state's curriculum for Holocaust education, created in 1994 when Governor Christine Whitman signed into law the Holocaust/Genocide Mandate Bill. Pordy's school district neighbors Clayton, the headquarters of a chapter of the Ku Klux Klan and the outlaw Warlock motorcycle gang.

Several years ago, a sixth-grader of German descent — who had attempted suicide several times and had difficulty functioning in class because of the trauma of witnessing the abuse of his siblings — vowed to one day become a teacher of the Holocaust. After high school, he went to Germany to see the camps and is now attending a community college. After his graduation ceremony, however, his father had greeted Pordy with the words, "You're the bitch who taught my son to love niggers and Jews."

Other parents thank her, however, saying now their children want to take out books from the library rather than video games. "I just didn't know; we didn't learn about this in high school," others say, according to Pordy. Today in Franklinville, Pordy's curriculum is an integral part of the students' education.

Adam Sacks is a journalist and filmmaker living in New York City. His short documentary "Kazimierz 2003" has its New York premiere April 18 at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.