

Yavapai County attorney guides Arizona legal community in Holocaust education

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Yavapai County Attorney Sheila Polk (left) and Dr. David Hess, president of the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater Prescott, worked together to create the "What You Do Matters: Lessons From the Holocaust" program. The program teaches prosecutors and law enforcement officers throughout Arizona about the Holocaust. *Courtesy Of Pete Bromley/"What You Do Matters"*

The night after she visited the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., Sheila Polk had trouble sleeping.

On that night in 2006, the Yavapai County attorney thought about how Adolf Hitler's extermination of 6 million Jews could not have happened without law enforcement officers, attorneys and judges staying silent.

Polk was eager to bring back what she had learned to the prosecutors in her office.

Then, she thought even bigger. The project kept growing.

The practicing Catholic is now a leader of an effort to teach prosecutors and law enforcement across Arizona about the Holocaust.

The Holocaust Museum, the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater Prescott and others helped her create the program, "What You Do Matters: Lessons From the Holocaust," in 2012.

No other state has a similar program. Agencies from across the country have asked law enforcement officers and lawyers trained by Polk to teach their employees.

"I've always felt that what we are doing is keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive, and it also gives meaning to 'Never again,'" Polk said.

Fourteen years later, Polk said she bases her decisions as county attorney off the education she received from the museum and from Holocaust survivors. She uses the lessons from the Holocaust in her work every day.

Polk, a Republican, was elected to office in 2000 as the first woman Yavapai County attorney. She manages more than 100 employees.

Polk said she will speak up in the face of wrong and won't succumb to peer pressure.

"I never want to be a foot soldier. I love collaborating with others, I love working with others. I am always going to try to find that courage when needed to speak up and fight for the right thing."

Holocaust survivor: 'Become an upstander'



Oskar Knoblauch went to Canada after the war and met his wife, Lila, an American, at Niagra Falls. They married in 1951 and had three children. When their oldest was accepted to Arizona State University in 1970, the family moved here. *Courtesy Of Oskar Knoblauch*

More than 9 million Jews lived in Europe in 1933, according to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

For Phoenix resident Oskar Knoblauch, 95, his childhood in Germany was normal for a 7-year-old until the Nazi Party took power.

His neighbors went overnight from being like family to betraying the Knoblauchs to authorities.

There was peace until the Nazis used a "weapon" — propaganda — to train people to hate the Jewish community, he said.

Knoblauch's family fled to Poland. The Nazis invaded. His mother was sent to a concentration camp — and so was his sweetheart.

Knoblauch thanks two men for saving his life. The men were Nazi officers who chose to do the right thing.

"Don't ever be a bystander, become an upstander," Knoblauch said. "A person who stands up, speaks up."

"Do the right thing for another person. This is what God wants you to do."

Knoblauch has shared his story to countless students and adults in Arizona.

'I felt on fire with this quest'

When Polk walked into the Holocaust Museum that day in 2006, she was unsure how the horrific event had anything to do with her job as county attorney.

The trip was suggested by the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater Prescott.

Dr. David Hess, the organization's president, and other leaders asked Polk, then-lawyer Kenton Jones, then-Yavapai County Superior Court Presiding Judge Robert Brutinel and others to join them in D.C.

Brutinel is now the chief justice of the Arizona Supreme Court. Jones, who later would serve on the Arizona Court of Appeals, retired this year.

Hess and his wife had been involved with the museum for a long time and thought the leaders would be interested in the organization's law enforcement program.

The group toured the museum, took part in the organization's Law Enforcement and Society class and met with the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg to learn about the court.

The law enforcement program started in 1999 after then-Metropolitan Police Department of D.C. Chief Charles Ramsey toured the museum. The museum also started working with the FBI in 2000 and later with the Philadelphia Police Department.

Sarah Reza, program manager of law and justice initiatives for the museum, said it estimates more than 150,000 law enforcement officials have participated, and the program has touched hundreds of agencies in the U.S. and internationally.

“ *(It shows) how much moral courage it requires to put your family and your livelihood at risk in order to stand up for a principle that you believe in.*

ROBERT BRUTINEL, CHIEF JUSTICE OF THE ARIZONA SUPREME COURT

Brutinel said the group learned that judges, lawyers and police officers were committed to following the anti-Jewish laws created by the Nazi government. Only a few people stood up and said they wouldn't participate.

He said it shows "how much moral courage it requires to put your family and your livelihood at risk in order to stand up for a principle that you believe in."

When asked to go on the trip, Polk thought the foundation was trying to tell her there was a problem inside the County Attorney's Office. They assured her there was no problem.

She had a feeling growing inside her throughout the day as she spent time at the museum.

"I felt on fire with this quest on how we could bring this course back to our prosecutors," Polk said.

She went from trying to find ways to help other Yavapai County Attorney's Office employees have the same experience to wanting to help other members of the state's legal system.

Polk told Hess she wanted to bring a similar training course to Arizona for law enforcement officials and lawyers.

The foundation and the County Attorney's Office began to work with the Holocaust museum, the Arizona Prosecuting Attorneys' Advisory Council (AAPAC) and the Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board (AzPOST).

Elizabeth Ortiz, AAPAC executive director and a teacher for the program, said she believes more than a thousand officers and lawyers have gone through "What You Do Matters."

Officers and prosecutors quickly saw the value in the training, she said.

"Although the number of facilitators and the geographic scope of WYDM have increased over the years, Sheila has remained its anchor," Ortiz said.

Reza said to her knowledge, no other program trains both prosecutors and law enforcement officials about the Holocaust.

Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich sits on the AzPOST board. He told The Arizona Republic it is imperative to educate generations about chapters of history that must never be allowed to repeat themselves.

"If it could happen in an advanced industrialized society like Germany, it could happen anywhere," Brnovich said. "I commend Yavapai County Attorney Sheila Polk for advancing this training for law enforcement officers and promoting a higher awareness of this critical issue in our communities."

Soon, members of the Arizona Judicial System wanted a similar course for judges. The Holocaust Museum has presented to judges and others working in the courts at judicial conferences in Arizona and across the country. It also created a program designed for judicial professionals.

"Sheila is in a lot of ways what I would say is a visionary," Reza said. "Because of Sheila, we now have a program for judges and attorneys that we hadn't thought to come up with on our own."

During the 2009 Conference of Chief Justices and State Court Administrators, the museum presented a workshop called "How the Courts Failed Germany."

Four Arizona leaders sat on the six-member advisory committee, which included Polk, former Arizona Supreme Court Justice Rebecca White Berch, Jerry Landau, director of government affairs for the Arizona Supreme Court, and David Byers, administrative office of the courts director.

Nina Tagovnik, co-chair of the Arizona Jewish Lawyers Association, said it is important to humanize what happened during the Holocaust and how different groups played a role. She said education in what happened is beneficial for the legal community.

"As Jews, we want to seek justice and to create a world where people are treated fairly," she said.

The association works to help the Jewish community and engages with the Collaborative Bar, which is a group of diverse bar organizations.

Brutinel said knowing about the Holocaust helps the legal community understand how easy it is for a totalitarian government or anyone else "to try to put their thumb on the scale."

It is important for judges to have the courage to stand up and say that won't happen on their watch, Brutinel said.

Limited knowledge of the Holocaust

Reza said thinking like Polk's and former D.C. chief Ramsey's is what is needed to help Holocaust education spread from the museum to the community.

According to a recent survey by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, almost two-thirds of millennials and Gen Zers don't know that millions of Jews were murdered in the Holocaust.

Polk was raised in Phoenix as one of 13 children in a Catholic family. She attended Arizona State University for undergraduate and law school.

Her education in the Holocaust as a child wasn't very extensive. However, she did read "The Diary of Anne Frank."

The book contains writings of a Jewish child whose family hid from the Nazis in the Netherlands. Frank died in a concentration camp.

Stanley Goldman, a professor at Loyola Law School, Los Angeles, said people shouldn't assume that others are aware of an event in history.

Goldman said he is surprised when he meets someone who has fluent knowledge of the Holocaust and other acts of genocide.

"I'm not surprised at all any longer when people have sort of never heard of it," he said. "They have no idea."

Goldman is the son of a Holocaust survivor. His two older siblings did not survive. His mother's story inspired him to write a book to help others understand what happened during the Holocaust.

Nazi atrocities ended in 1945, with the end of World War II. Knoblauch is among the declining number of Holocaust survivors in Arizona.

The importance of 'Never again'



Oskar Knoblauch (left) before World War II with sister Ilse, mother Ruzia, father Leopold and brother Sigmund. *Courtesy Of Oskar Knoblauch*

It's been 75 years since the beginning of the Nuremberg Trials, which prosecuted 22 leaders of Nazi Germany.

According to the Holocaust Museum, the International Military Tribunal sentenced 12 leaders to death and three to life in prison. Four leaders received sentences ranging from 10 to 20 years, and three were acquitted.

Knoblauch said he saw how the Nazis rose to power.

"I remember just about everything: how they did it, how they managed to persuade millions of people to become hateful," he said.

A German police officer allowed a child to strike his dad and take away the man's bike, simply because he was Jewish, Knoblauch said.

He remembers his family being placed into a ghetto in Poland and only receiving 480 calories of food each day.

Reza said, "As we lose the 'eyewitness generation,' I think it is really important that this history is not a vacuum in time. There are lessons that we can think of and learn from as we move further away from. We need to understand why this happened and how."

Acts of genocide still occur across the world. International tribunals work to prosecute these type of human rights crimes.

According to Goldman, litigation concerning Holocaust victims is still going on.

Goldman is the director of the Center for the Study of Law and Genocide. The center works with international lawyers, international criminal tribunal prosecutors and nonprofits to help victims.

Recently, the center submitted a brief to the Supreme Court of the United States on supporting victims in two cases concerning art stolen by the Nazis from Hungarian Holocaust victims and Jewish art dealers.

Impact of 'What You Do Matters'



Amelia Cramer, chief deputy of the Pima County Attorney's Office, teaches southern Arizona law enforcement recruits during the "What You Do Matters: Lessons From the Holocaust" program in February 2018. *Pima County Attorney's Office*

The "What You Do Matters: Lessons From the Holocaust" program started in February 2012. Leaders in prosecutorial and law enforcement agencies now teach the course.

It has been offered to officers and lawyers from more than 100 different agencies across Arizona, including the Tucson, Phoenix and Mesa police departments, the Northern Arizona Regional Training Academy and the Maricopa, Pima, Mohave, Santa Cruz and Coconino county attorney's offices.

Since many of the lawyers and officers are not able to tour the Holocaust Museum, during the class participants are shown photos, posters and films similar to what is shown in the D.C. museum.

They discuss the history of the Holocaust and how those in the legal system went down a "slippery slope" by assisting in the deaths of the Jewish population.

Jason Kalish, trial division chief for the Maricopa County Attorney's Office, has taught the program for several years. He was nominated by former County Attorney Bill Montgomery to become a facilitator when he was in charge of the office's training bureau.

Kalish said it can be easy for prosecutors or officers to become jaded and lose perspective on why they entered their professions.

The program helps prosecutors remember why their jobs are so important, he said.

"You can see people remembering why they wanted to make a difference and forget all about the bureaucracy, the negativity and go back to helping people," he said.

At the end of the class, participants have time to reflect and discuss what they can learn from history.

Kalish said the historical backdrop is important, especially with current events like George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police and similar news. He said it is common for people to get defensive, but the class reminds participants to take a step back and think.

"In training that really deals with history and something that is absolutely horrific that happened in the world, we are not comparing you to them," Kalish said. "But this is what happens when you don't look inward, when you

don't think about why you are doing what you are doing and when you demonize a group of people."

Participants also receive challenge coins as a way to remember the class's lessons and to inspire them to do the right thing.

Polk's inspiration: Gerda Weissmann Klein



Holocaust survivor Gerda Weissman Klein (left) developed a friendship with Yavapai County Attorney Sheila Polk (center) after the "What You Do Matters" program was created. Polk created the program to educate law enforcement officers and lawyers in Arizona about the Holocaust. Former Cottonwood Police Chief Doug Bartosh (right) was one of the program's original facilitators. *Courtesy Of Sheila Polk*

The program's challenge coin was inspired by the life of Phoenix resident and Holocaust survivor Gerda Weissmann Klein.

Klein, 96, is the author of 10 books and a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011.

When the Nazis invaded Poland, her brother was taken away by soldiers and then she was separated from her parents at 18, and sent to a labor camp.

She and 2,000 other women were led on a 350-mile death march and were abandoned at a factory in the Czech town of Volary. She was one of 120 who survived.

Klein fell in love with an American soldier who was involved in her rescue. They married in Paris and she moved to the U.S.

During a speech at an event in 2011 for those working in the legal system, Klein thanked the audience for being "keepers of freedom."

Polk said she was amazed by the remark.

The women developed a close friendship. Polk calls Klein her inspiration.

In 2018, APAAC gave Polk an award named after Klein and her husband, the "Gerda and Kurt Klein Guardian of Freedom Award."

Polk said one of her most treasured recognitions is the Shofar Zachor Award, presented by the Phoenix Holocaust Association in 2011. The award is given to a person for outstanding contributions to the teaching of the Holocaust and genocide awareness.

Rising number of hate crimes

Hate crimes and anti-Semitism have increased in recent years across Arizona and the United States. The federal government does prosecute hate crimes — one case recently involved a Queen Creek man connected with a neo-Nazi group leaving threatening messages for journalists.

However, there is no hate crime statute in Arizona.

In Maricopa County, law enforcement agencies encounter crimes involving anti-Semitism, acts against people of various religions, races and ethnicities frequently.

A member of a neo-Nazi organization was sentenced in 2019 for killing a mother when he shot at the woman and her Black boyfriend.

Two women pleaded guilty to damaging a Tempe mosque in 2018 while children watched.

One night in December 2017, four teenagers parked outside of a Chandler home that had a menorah displayed on its front lawn. The menorah was made out of PVC pipes.

The teens, three minors and one who was 19, took the menorah from the lawn, according to the Maricopa County Attorney's Office. They altered it into a swastika to put in their friend's yard, took photos and then returned it to the home.



Vandals in Chandler turned a homemade menorah into a swastika. *Naomi Ellis*

All of the teens accepted plea agreements. The three minors received community service, had to write an apology letter to the victims and write a 10-page essay after meeting a Holocaust survivor.

The 19-year-old, Clive Jamar Wilson, pleaded guilty to a count of aggravated criminal damage. He also was ordered to write an apology and an essay, do community service and meet with a Holocaust survivor.

Knoblauch met with the teens. He said they come from diverse backgrounds: One was a child of an attorney, another had a Jewish grandfather, and two were people of color.

Wilson posted an apology on social media two days after his arrest. He wrote that their actions were “reckless, stupid, idiotic, and insensitive.” Wilson said the “horrible prank” went against his Jamaican heritage.

Lawrence Bell, executive director for the Arizona Jewish Historical Society, said it is important to remember that the Holocaust is an example of racism that was not based on skin color.

He said the Jewish population wasn't considered white or indigenous to Europe by those in power. They were seen as inferior.

"When you take a narrowly focused view of racism as only being an act against skin color or only being based on skin color, I think you leave out other characteristics like religion, ethnicity, heritage," Bell said. "Hatred assumes many forms."

Prescott making a national impact



Yavapai County Attorney Sheila Polk (left) and Gov. Doug Ducey (center) accept an award from Marcus Appelbaum (right), director of law, justice and society initiatives of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, on March 15, 2018. The state of Arizona was recognized for its work with the "What You Do Matters: Lessons From the Holocaust" program, which educates prosecutors and law enforcement officers. *Yavapai County Attorney's Office*

Many people in the United States don't know Prescott exists, according to Hess. However, the town is backing a program with national impact.

There is a high demand for Arizona lawyers and law enforcement officers to teach the program at agencies across the country.

Teachers often use their vacation days to travel to agencies in different states to train others in Holocaust education. The program is run by grants and not government funds.

"This is just an example of that you can never tell where something great can happen," Hess said.

The museum presented Arizona law enforcement its Leadership Tribute Award in 2018 for the program's work "to safeguard democracy by preserving justice, individual rights, and liberties."

Gov. Doug Ducey accepted the award with Polk, Hess and other leaders. He stated on Facebook that the program "is truly unique" and a source of pride for the state.

Leaders of the "What You Do Matters" program hope to make it into a national institute to help train people in various professions. They want to provide tailored Holocaust education programs, including for the medical community.

The Jewish Foundation of Greater Prescott is working to begin raising money to hire a national director.

Hess said they believe that creating this course is a way of using the history of the Holocaust to turn it into a positive force moving forward.

"That phrase, 'Never again,' is used in the context of the Holocaust to say we are never going to let that happen again," Polk said.

"But if you don't study it, but if you don't learn from it, how do you ever keep that from ever happening again?"

How to learn about the Holocaust



Holocaust survivor Oskar Knoblauch has dedicated his life to educating the nation's youth about the Holocaust by sharing his personal story, as well as the stories of those who perished. *Erin O'Connor/The Republic*

The Arizona Jewish Historical Society provides numerous opportunities for the public to learn about the Holocaust.

Bell said this type of education is important because it shows that the rights provided by the government can be taken away at any time and what can happen when a nation is divided.

The organization offers the public the chance to hear from survivors and their children through programs like Holocaust Survivor Conversations and Our Parents' Stories. Bell said listening to survivors helps the public hear about how they deal with trauma and reconciliation.

The historical society is working to create a Holocaust education center.

Robert Sutz, a Scottsdale artist, has created life masks and portraits of Holocaust survivors, liberators and "righteous gentiles." The historical society is working to create a permanent gallery for his collection.

Knoblauch, other survivors and lawmakers hoped a bill introduced by Rep. Alma Hernandez, D-Tucson, would pass requiring schools to teach students about the Holocaust.

The bill died as the session was cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic. But the Arizona Department of Education turned it into a mandate for schools.