



Whittier Union HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

To Achieve and Maintain Excellence...

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Sept. 8, 2023 **CONTACT:** Andrea Garcia **PHONE:** 909-445-1001

Whittier Union Educators Experience Living History During Visit to Poland, Auschwitz

WHITTIER – Three Whittier Union history teachers received an up-close look at living history when they participated in the Auschwitz Legacy Program, a one-week trip to Poland in July that included tours of the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp and the Warsaw Ghetto, as well as access to archives of letters and personal items saved from Holocaust victims during World War II.

John Bellanti of Whittier High School, Gena Arriola-Salas of Pioneer High School and MaryAnn Fajardo of Frontier High School joined a group of 30 educators and Holocaust researchers from across the United States as part of an education initiative created by the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Foundation to keep the memories of victims alive.

For Bellanti, Arriola-Salas and Fajardo – who all include WWII and the Holocaust in their lesson plans and have worked extensively with entities such as the Los Angeles Holocaust Museum, the United States Holocaust Museum and the Anti-Defamation League – the trip was educational. Each teacher discovered new information, such as the existence of the Ringelblum Archives, a collection of letters written by Jewish families in Warsaw that were hidden in milk cans and are now preserved at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

During the trip, the three teachers found themselves in areas and locales where Holocaust victims arrived, slept and washed up. At the Auschwitz Museum, seeing handprints on the walls and unused cannisters of Zyklon B provided images that the teachers said will stay with them forever.

“I’ve been to Pearl Harbor and Normandy. I wanted to put myself in these situations because I want to be able to explain to my students the history as best as I can,” Bellanti said. “But this one will really be hard. It will be hard to teach these lessons without getting emotional. But you have to tell them, you have to teach the history.”

For Arriola-Salas, the tours were essential for her roles as a historian and teacher, but once inside – where she could see for herself how meticulous planning and technological innovation conspired to perpetrate horrendous crimes – she said she wondered if it was right to be able to view this history at all.

“I felt torn. I’ve waited all these years to finally come to the Auschwitz Museum, then I felt like, is it O.K. to be here?” Arriola-Salas said. “It’s not easy to describe what you see to those who have not seen it themselves. But that’s the goal of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Foundation, to preserve what’s there, not to rebuild or reinterpret. They are an amazing organization that wants to ensure students are learning these lessons.”

The teachers toured the Warsaw Ghetto extensively, an area where more than 450,000 Polish Jews were held before many were taken to concentration camps. The encampment was leveled by Nazis during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943.

– MORE –

The tour group viewed the remaining segment of the iron wall and remnants of the ghetto, which is now mostly apartment complexes. The group also spent a day in Krakow touring centuries-old synagogues that were spared destruction by the Nazis.

“I was humbled by the trip, both personally and professionally,” said Fajardo, who traveled to Berlin in 2019 to meet with Holocaust survivors. “Visiting the camp was impactful. Just to see what you have been teaching for so many years and see it firsthand. It’s hard to put into words.”

As Bellanti, Arriola-Salas and Fajardo work to incorporate their experiences in their classroom lessons on WWII, they agree that the best possible outcome of their overseas trip is to teach their students to be good, kind and empathetic human beings who will stand up to those who employ hateful speech and seek to eliminate our personal freedoms.

One possible outcome of the trip abroad is a joint effort by Whittier Union and the Foundation to arrange for a virtual tour of Auschwitz-Birkenau for Whittier Union’s Advanced Placement European History or World Civilization students, which aims to give students a better perspective of the history contained within its walls.

The trip also afforded Bellanti, Arriola-Salas and Fajardo the opportunity to meet with representatives of Holocaust museums in Los Angeles, Colorado and Michigan, which could lead to a series of professional development seminars with history teachers throughout the District.

“It is an honor to have three of our educators selected to travel with the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Foundation and participate in this indispensable yet heartbreaking journey,” Superintendent Dr. Monica Oviedo said. “The true beneficiaries will be Whittier Union students, who will gain tremendous knowledge and a unique perspective about the Holocaust. It is more important than ever that the lessons learned from World War II are passed on to a new generation, so that no one will ever forget what happened in the ghettos and concentration camps of Europe.”

PHOTO CAPTION

WUHSD_EDUCATORS1: MaryAnn Fajardo of Frontier High School (left), Gena Arriola-Salas of Pioneer High School (center) and John Bellanti of Whittier High School (right) participated in the Auschwitz Legacy Program, a one-week trip to Poland in July, as part of an education initiative created by the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Foundation to keep the memories of victims alive.

###

OUR MISSION:

The Whittier Union High School District provides all students with an engaging, quality standards-based instructional program delivered by a well-trained staff resulting in improved student achievement. Whittier Union High School District works to achieve and maintain excellence in providing a comprehensive education for all students.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES:

Jaime López
President
Gary Mendez
Vice President

Josefina E. Canchola
Clerk
Irma Rodríguez Moisa
Member

Dr. Russell Castañeda-Calleros
Member
Dr. Monica Oviedo
Superintendent