

Learning to Remember

Twelve years ago when she began teaching Middle School English at Saint George's, Ruth Ann Johnson started assigning "The Diary of Anne Frank" to look at Anne's writing. "But the topic of the Holocaust captures you, and it kind of grew over the years," she admits.

Her students have researched concentration camps and historical figures ("Hitler is always a hot topic"), written fictional stories, and presented their own family histories. "One student's grandfather was in the Dutch Resistance during World War II, and she had visited the family home in the Netherlands that included a hidden wall."

Johnson has plugged in to a wealth of teaching resources over the years. She supplemented her lessons with books and posters from the Teaching Trunk, a chest provided free to teachers by the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center (WSHERC). That led to a professional development trip to Amsterdam and Copenhagen in 2007 to visit sites from Anne Frank's diary and the book "Number the Stars" about Danish Jews. Then last year, she received a fellowship grant to attend the Summer Institute for Teachers in New York City hosted by the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, and this March she spent a week in Berlin viewing evidence of Jewish life before 1933 and the places where the Nazis planned and organized the Holocaust.

"I've really appreciated the school's support for professional development," Johnson says. "It's phenomenal to visit these places and hear survivors say 'I was hidden behind this wall.'"

Johnson serves on the WSHERC advisory board and taught a master class for educators this spring on Rescue and Resistance—a focus at Saint George's as well. "I always end the unit talking about rescue and resistance to reinforce that there's

hope and people can make a difference," she says. That message also comes through in the final essays her students write, often highlighting Anne Frank's courage in facing discrimination and violence.

But this year the 30 middle school students who accompanied Johnson and history teacher Steve Gavin to Washington D.C. in June had the eye-opening experience of visiting the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum the same day it was attacked by a neo-Nazi gunman.

The Saint George's group toured the museum from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. on Wednesday, June 10, and were safely on the opposite side of the museum building just over an hour later when the shooting occurred. "It was a lesson we weren't counting on, but it certainly reinforced what they had learned about hate crimes," says Johnson.

The 7th and 8th grade students on the tour took both their visit to the museum and the news of the shooting very seriously. "We had an excellent discussion about the reality of violence that specifically targets certain people," says Johnson.

"This is why I teach the Holocaust, because this still happens today."

The students' tours that day had a broader theme of remembering acts of violence. They had begun with a tour of Ford's Theater, where President Lincoln was shot, before viewing the Holocaust Museum and ending their day at the Pentagon memorial to the victims of the September 11th attack. Now they have something else to remember from that day that will keep the lessons they learned in Johnson's class very real for a long time to come.

Current events reinforce Ruth Ann Johnson's lessons on the Holocaust

On the Web

See more photos from the MS Trip to Washington D.C. and from Ruth Ann's visit to Holocaust sites in Berlin at www.sgs.org/news_and_photos

Johnson guides 7th graders through an online search for primary sources on the Holocaust

