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Documenting history

Students in local high schools are gaining an understanding into the lives of those who have suffered human rights violations

By LOIS PEARLMAN, ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

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Ida Piotrkowski is flanked by her sons Nate, left, and Irv. Photos and comments by Irv, a Penngrove attorney, are part of an exhibit of the original Survivor Project panels on display in the Casa Grande library for three weeks, starting Feb. 12

They say those who refuse to learn from history are compelled to repeat it, so a project that is coming to the Petaluma high schools this spring strives to teach history in a way that is unforgettable.

Called the Essence of Acceptance, the project brings members of the community who have suffered human rights violations into the classrooms where they are interviewed by students. Then students create some type of artistic or social service activity to express what they have learned from the interviews.

It has its roots in an exhibit called The Survivor Project, a series of interviews and photographs created by Phyllis Rosenfield and Lisa Slater a decade ago.

Holocaust survivors Joe and Ida Piotrkowski with their sons Irv, left, and Nate in an early family photo.



Rosenfield first conceived the idea in 1986 as a way to capture the experiences of Holocaust survivors. That year there was an initiative on the California ballot that called for internment of people with AIDS in camps. The concept, she said, brought up images of people in Nazi concentration camps.

"It pushed my buttons," she said. "I wanted to take photos of the survivors (of the Holocaust) and to find someone to take down their oral histories."

Rosenfield teamed up with Lisa Slater, an oral history expert who at that time was married to a Santa Rosa rabbi, and they set to work interviewing and photographing Holocaust survivors in Sonoma County.

Under the sponsorship of Sonoma State University the project grew to include other people, Japanese Americans who had lived in the internment camps during World War II, Cambodians who escaped the Khmer Rouge, and Native Americans whose ancestors had been forcibly removed by missionaries and settlers.

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PHYLLIS ROSENFELD

What these different people had in common, the pair discovered, was that "they had a short amount of time to gather their belongings to go somewhere, and they didn't know where they were going."

Rosenfield and Slater mounted their work on free-standing panels and created an exhibit that tours schools and other venues around the state.

The next step, Rosenfield said, was to share the oral history process as well as the finished product with the rest of the community.

"Rather than just show it around, we wanted to figure out how others in the community could do this same project," she explained.

Slater went on to other work, but Rosenfield, a former teacher with a background in the social sciences as well as an artist, decided to create a curriculum that would allow high school students to take oral histories of people and turn them into projects that could be shared with the larger community.

She formed a non-profit organization with a board of directors that includes Coast Miwok tribal chief Greg Sarris, and wrote a series of lesson plans that includes four parts - an education in human rights, learning how to take oral histories, interviews with community members, and projects to reflect what the students learn from the interviews.

"We are really trying to cross some lines that are difficult," Rosenfield said. "We want to tell some stories that haven't been told."

Since she started the program three years ago, Rosenfield has worked with several Northern California high schools, including Maria Carillo in Santa Rosa, the Sonoma Academy, the Rio Lindo Academy, Sequoia High School in Redwood City, and the Court Community and Alternative schools run by the Sonoma County Office of Education.

"It's been amazingly successful because it validates people's experience," she said. "And students get a toe into other people's experiences."

This year the Healthy Community Consortium (HC²) received a \$20,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Sonoma County to bring the project to local high schools. So far teachers at Casa Grande, San Antonio and Sonoma Mountain have gotten involved in the project. Lisa Cain, social studies chair at Casa Grande, is coordinating the teacher trainings.

The extensive curriculum adheres to the state standards for language arts and social studies. Along with reading, writing and history, it allows students to gain an understanding of other people's lives.

"Given the demographics and diversity of our region, working with The Survivor Project is not only educationally sound, I believe it is socially responsible," said former Petaluma School District Superintendent Carl Wong, who worked with HC² and Rosenfield to bring the program to Petaluma.

In association with the project, there will be an exhibit of the original Survivor Project panels in the Casa Grande library, 333 Casa Grande Road, for three weeks, starting Feb. 12. Look for the photos and comments of Irv Piotrkowski, a Penngrove attorney whose parents are Holocaust survivors.

HC² will be taking applications from community members who would like to be interviewed by students for the project. Survivors of all types of circumstances are encouraged to apply. Call 773-4621 for more information.