



Bringing Anne Frank to the Campus Library

EDITORIAL

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A place for Holocaust education

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Over the course of two academic years, the College of Saint Mary Library has become a pivotal site for students and the wider public to engage with Holocaust education. This isn't, at first glance, intuitive. The College of Saint Mary (CSM) is a small, Catholic liberal arts university in central Omaha, Nebraska. However, this historically all-women's college has strong social justice roots and a mission based on the values of the Sisters of Mercy, who are focused on serving social justice causes in five areas of critical concern: earth, immigration, nonviolence, racism, and women. For the past one hundred years, education programs have been at CSM's foundation, and one faculty member, Dr. Mark Gudgel, has made Holocaust and genocide education an integral part of his teaching and research practice. Dr. Gudgel believes that “the critical concerns of the Sisters of Mercy, the mission of the university, and efforts to teach about the Holocaust coincide in a striking and profound symmetry of purpose” (Mark Gudgel, email message to author, May 3, 2024).

CSM Library's involvement started in January of 2023 when library staff attended a small lecture on Dr. Gudgel's research on the Sarajevo Roses. Seeing an opportunity to support new initiatives, library staff began to help plan *Yom HaShoa* (Holocaust Remembrance Day) programming. This included hosting an exhibit from the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center (IHMEC), partnering to bring guest lecturers to campus, working on collection review and development, and creating book displays and resource lists. Over the course of the past twelve months, the library has played a role in bringing Anne Frank's words and spirit to the CSM campus, which, in turn, has helped bring the library community into a place of greater engagement with Holocaust education, both as learners and colleagues.

In the fall of 2023, we received word that Omaha's Institute for Holocaust Education (IHE) would loan the traveling exhibit *Anne Frank - A History for Today*, which is on a worldwide tour coordinated by the Anne Frank House. Additionally, Dr. Gudgel learned about an opportunity for CSM to apply to be a planting site for a sapling grown from the chestnut tree Anne had written about from the Secret Annex window. The tree itself fell in 2010, but the Anne Frank Center Sapling Project has continued an earlier seedling initiative to share “Anne Frank's love of nature with organizations across its coalition that have a common commitment to honoring [her] memory through education, free expression, and belief in humanity” (Anne Frank Center USA 2024).

Library staff joined campus colleagues on a committee planning to bring the exhibit into the library, applying to host the tree, and exploring other programming possibilities. As part of the tremendous group effort, I helped assemble the sapling grant application and wrote a small grant to bring the play *Letters from Anne and Martin* to campus, which combines the voices of Anne Frank and Martin Luther King, Jr. Both grant applications were

successful, though the play is currently on hiatus, pending endorsement by the King family. The tree was dedicated in a ceremony on Arbor Day 2024 with participation from the Anne Frank Center and our Jewish community partners, among others. The tree was planted at a later date, however, as a tornado forecast prevented us from planting during the ceremony.

The exhibit came with stipulations and support concerning community education and interaction, which helped increase both collaboration and student participation. While the exhibit was displayed on bilingual panels (English and Spanish), it was created with the intention that community docents would guide visitors. These trained guides could offer more context and foster discussion. Training the docents would be accomplished through educational sessions about the historical context and how to educate guests effectively. Dr. Gudgel also put together an opportunity to go to the Netherlands. Care went into making the Amsterdam trip as affordable as possible, although it was not grant-funded. A group of ten faculty, students, and staff were able to go, including four students, the university president, and myself. The trip was short but allowed the group to make in-depth visits to the Anne Frank House, the National Holocaust Museum, and Camp Westerbork.

A commonality between the sites we visited in Amsterdam was a strong emphasis on interacting with the lived experiences of Dutch victims and survivors of the Holocaust. Understanding the scale of the atrocities matters, as well, and is depicted in many forms. Westerbork was a transit camp where Anne and her family were among nearly 107,000 Dutch Jews and several hundred Roma and Sinti people imprisoned to await transport to concentration camps (Camp Westerbork Memorial Centre, n.d.). The site displays individual blocks for the 102,000 who never returned, and the remaining train car broadcasts each name on a continual loop, giving a sense of scale while tacitly acknowledging each individual life. CSM visitors were also able to hear the story from a living survivor, who had spent months at the camp with his family before being taken to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany.

Walking through the streets of Amsterdam, particularly through the historic Jewish quarter on the way to the National Holocaust Museum, one may stumble on the personal in the form of a brass *stolperstein* (in English: “stumbling stone”). On each stone is affixed a brass plate engraved with the words “here lived,” followed by the name, birth and death dates, and deportation information of a Holocaust victim. The museum’s first section is devoted to individual human stories through artifacts, letters, and written and verbal testimonies. The second section helps visitors understand the role that law and society played in allowing systemic discrimination, dehumanization, and murder. The museum neighbors the site of the Hollandsche Schouwburg memorial, which retains the ghost of the shape of the theatre that once stood there. The theater was a vibrant cultural centerpiece before the Nazi regime used it as a holding and transportation center.

The Anne Frank House was, of course, the deepest look at a personal story and one that resonated deeply. Climbing the steep steps into the attic was a powerful experience; having first read the diary at an early age, I found it had been described so well that it felt like a return. Visitors were able to reflect in the space that the Frank family and four others shared and learn more about their personal histories, as well as the political and cultural forces that shaped their experience as Jews and German refugees.

Being able to connect to history in a hands-on way in Amsterdam was helpful for everyone who joined the trip. Nearly all travelers either served as docents or participated in the ceremony surrounding the sapling dedication. Docent training occurred within CSM Library and the neighboring classroom space,

and provided opportunities for viewing historical videos, learning presentation techniques, and interacting with the photographs and text included on the exhibit floor. The exhibit's thirty-three panels depicted the personal life of the Frank family, the political situation within Germany as the Nazis rose to power, life in the Netherlands, and context surrounding World War II and the mechanisms of the death camps. Docents were encouraged to find pieces of information or photographs that resonated with them personally to use as focal points within the guided tours.

As the partner organization for the exhibit, the Institute for Holocaust Education sent educators to coordinate this process and ensure a smooth set-up process, including physically assisting with assembling the panels and providing supplementary materials, such as signage, links, and videos. Larger groups could email the library to book times for a docent-led visit, while having two trained docents in the library was helpful for other visitors who had questions. With the central open area of the library displaying the panels, a significant portion of the student community had an interaction with the information on some level. The library requested that guests sign a guestbook as a means of getting program numbers. While many people did not sign in, including at the well-attended sapling reception, library staff were able to confirm seventy-seven guests who visited the library specifically to view the exhibit.

Having become the permanent home of an Anne Frank Sapling, and with two years of successful spring programming behind us, everyone involved is committed to continuing this work in 2025. Future plans include continuing to add to the Anne Frank collection and evaluating new Holocaust and genocide education resources and opportunities, either within the library or at a possible future education center. All stakeholders believe in the enduring value of Holocaust education. Julia Sarbo, an educator with the National Holocaust Museum who met with the CSM group in Amsterdam, makes a compelling case that "what young people want to discuss and ask each other about is the injustice" (Sarbo 2024, 34). The museum reaches young people through its "two-pronged approach—highlighting experiences of the persecuted and raising awareness of the rule of law" (34). Through the CSM Library's programming, students can integrate what they learn with coursework and their experiences in the world to strengthen their resolve for justice and commitment to finding shared values that transcend personal faith or political alliances.

References

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