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Amid a recent uptick in antisemitic incidents in Richmond and across the U.S., RTD Opinions asked Samuel Asher, executive director of the Virginia Holocaust Museum, about the institution's efforts to educate visitors about the Holocaust and why the history still is so important today.

Richmond has a special place in the history of the Holocaust. How does the museum seek to tell that story?

Virginia Holocaust Museum is unique because we tell the story of the Holocaust through the eyes of the survivors, liberators and rescuers who came to Richmond after World War II. The Virginia Holocaust Museum is one of the few Holocaust

museums in the United States and the only Holocaust museum in Virginia outside of Washington.

About 100 survivors and their families settled in Richmond. Their stories figure prominently in our exhibits. We also have conducted a number of programs for the second and third Generations of the Shoah [the Holocaust] here in Richmond, so that the process of keeping the history alive will continue.

Through our permanent exhibits, temporary exhibits, educational programming and outreach, the museum preserves and documents the history of the Holocaust and employs the history of the Holocaust and other genocides to educate and inspire future generations to fight racism, bigotry and prejudice.

In 2019, the museum welcomed more than 46,000 visitors (including 8,000 students) from all 50 states, and more than a dozen countries. We've had more than 10,000 visitors since July 2020 when we reopened after the COVID-19 shutdown.

What differentiates your museum from other Holocaust-related institutions and memorials in the United States?

There are about 15 Holocaust museums in the U.S. There also are many Holocaust

education centers and memorials. Virginia Holocaust Museum is one of the top ten museums in the United States in terms of size. We compare to museums in Houston, Chicago, etc. We are able to directly reach many students, teachers and visitors in the Mid-Atlantic region and beyond. What makes us unique is that quotes, videos and other artifacts from local area survivors are incorporated into many parts of our permanent exhibit and our temporary exhibits. We are a more hands-on museum than most of the other Holocaust museums.

Just as we are losing thousands of World War II veterans daily, we also are losing Holocaust survivors. What is the museum doing to chronicle their experiences?

The Virginia Holocaust Museum archives hold more than 320 Virginia Survivor Collections and 317 oral histories of survivors. During COVID-19, we have been “Zooming” Holocaust survivors and second-generation speakers into the classrooms. Postpandemic, we are confident that the student groups will be coming back to the museum, and that already has begun.

On June 27, the “Stand Against Antisemitism” rally brought together members of the faith community, elected officials and the public. What role can the museum play in countering rising antisemitism and hate crimes?

Two years ago, a study by the Schoen Consulting Group found that the more Americans know about the Holocaust, the more likely they are to keep away from racism, intolerance and antisemitism. The reverse also is true. When people have not heard about the Holocaust, they are more likely to tolerate antisemitism. So our job never has been more important.

In August, the Virginia Holocaust Museum, the Black History Museum and the Virginia Museum of History & Culture are collaborating to bring the Violins of Hope to Richmond. This is a collection of 60 violins played by Jewish musicians in the camps and ghettos during the Holocaust. Each violin tells a story of resilience such as surviving the horrors of Dachau and Auschwitz or playing concerts in the ghetto of Vilna, and more. A community steering committee is preparing unique experiences through exhibits, a concert series, educational programs and outreach to audiences across central Virginia. The way that you counter the rise of antisemitism is through programs like Violins of Hope, along with teaching many

visitors, teachers and students about the Holocaust and other genocides.

In Congress, the House and Senate each have established a Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Antisemitism. What do you hope to see accomplished by federal lawmakers?

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has informed us about a high level of antisemitic incidents across the country. Even worse, the 2020 ADL audit reported the highest year on record for antisemitic incidents in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia. The bipartisan task force seeks to develop solutions to eliminate antisemitic hatred from our communities and from our country. Any and all efforts to tamp down the antisemitic epidemic that is all around us today would help us get to important conversations of healing and reconciliation.

Clearly, the Virginia Holocaust Museum would be glad to help with increased Holocaust education whenever we are called upon to provide the educational resources at our disposal.

The Virginia General Assembly recently established the Culturally Relevant and Inclusive Education Practices Advisory Committee, a body charged with “supporting anti-bias education and response” in Virginia. What are your expectations for this new state committee?

The Culturally Relevant and Inclusive Education Practices Advisory Committee, which includes two board members of the Virginia Holocaust Museum, has been meeting over the past couple of months and will be sending their recommendations to the state. They have a goal of increasing educational programs that focus on marginalized groups and histories that are often overlooked. The history of the Holocaust often is overlooked and we hope that this advisory committee will be able to increase access to Holocaust education as well as other educational programs.

What are some upcoming exhibits at the museum?

Our Alexander Lebenstein Teacher Education Institute will take place from July 12-23, 2021. In partnership with Longwood University, Virginia Holocaust Museum sponsors an online class that helps educators answer students’ questions about the Holocaust and provides valuable tools and resources to teach about the period that often is called mankind’s darkest hour.

In addition to the above-mentioned Violins of Hope exhibit from August through October, we soon will open our new permanent Children's Memorial, honoring the memory of 1.5 million children who were killed during the Holocaust.

I always use the term "diabolical" when referring to action taken by the Nazis in perpetrating the Holocaust. Why did the Nazis murder the children alongside their families? Why did they want to murder the next generation? These are some of the difficult questions to ponder when viewing this important exhibit.

The Virginia Holocaust Museum's Master Plan Committee has been meeting for more than a year. We believe that this master plan will serve as a guide and expression of a long-range vision in support of the museum and its mission. As the first stage of the capital renovation, a new HVAC system is presently being installed. Now the Capital Campaign begins.

The Capital Campaign goal for building projects is \$1.5 million and the Endowment Goal is \$1 million for a total of \$2.5 million to be raised in honor of our 25th anniversary, which will be celebrated in 2022.

For more information about our exhibits and plans for the future, visit:

vaholocaust.org

— *Pamela Stallsmith and Chris Gentilviso*

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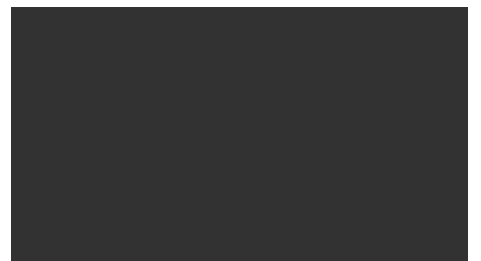
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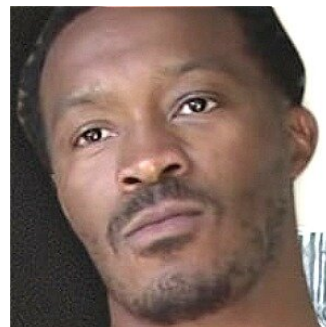
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