

15th Annual Israel Arbeiter Holocaust Essay Contest

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Elie Wiesel explains why making memories is essential. He vocalized, “Without a memory, there would be no culture, no civilization, no society, no future. When we endure an experience, the experience cannot stay with me alone. It must be opened, it must become an offering. It must be deepened and given and shared.” By transporting us to the past and creating opportunities to retell important stories, memorials rekindle our memories, remind us that choices determine history, and motivate us to commit to our values in pursuit of a more just and beautiful future.

Experiencing any memorial as a passive observer is not enough to preserve its meaning. Memorials are like matches; they offer a spark but we must ignite the fire to enact the change they intend to manifest in our world. When I stand before the New England Holocaust Memorial, I imagine what it must have been like for Stephan Ross, creator of the memorial, to dig his way out of a latrine of excrement where he hid to escape death and then muster the courage to speak up and tell his story. I try to picture what other survivors like Rena Finder and Izzy Arbeiter went through to recount and relive their experiences as advocates for this memorial. These survivors understood that sharing their stories could help us generate the empathy necessary to uproot indifference.

Just as survivors have assumed the burden of sharing their stories, we must assume the responsibility of translating their memories into actions that repair the world. My action occurred after I heard the anti-Semitic and racist chants from the angry mob of white supremacists in Charlottesville. In that moment, my thoughts returned to the stories

donated to me by a generation of Holocaust survivors. In honor of Elie Wiesel, Stephan Ross, Izzy Arbeiter, Rena Finder and others around the world who have been targets of genocide, I realized it was my turn to bear witness, speak out, and refuse indifference. This call to action motivated me to bring the Anti-Defamation League's Walk Against Hate to my high school. I organized 500 students and staff to participate. As part of the Walk, which I am now working to memorialize as an annual event, I asked each participant to think about an act of hate that they had either witnessed or experienced, and then to process how they felt in that moment. Then, I asked them to consider the courage required to be an upstander. My goal was to evoke empathy within my community and inspire us to act together to pursue a more just world. I continue to be inspired by Elie Wiesel's message that bearing witness to injustice must compel us to actively work against indifference in order to effect real change.