



Holocaust cattle car gives Jersey Shore students brutal lesson on history, hatred

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As they sat inside a darkened cattle car, 80 sets of footprints adorning the floor below their feet and the ghosts of one of history's darkest periods projected on the wooden walls all around them, Marlboro Middle School students were given a solemn task: Remember them. Be their voice.

"Their memories are now your memories," concluded a video telling the stories of two Holocaust victims who were transported to concentration camps, packed into a cattle car just like the one holding the students.

The vessel is the centerpiece of [Hate Ends Now's Cattle Car Exhibit](#), brought to the school in early April through a partnership between [Marlboro Township Public Schools](#), [Marlboro Jewish Center](#) and the [Center to Combat Antisemitism and Reinforce Multicultural Acceptance \(CARMA\)](#), an initiative of [The Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey](#).

The exhibit also visited Freehold Regional High School District's Law and Public Service magnet program at Colts Neck High School. Altogether, nearly 1,000 students experienced the exhibit, along with hundreds of educators, faith leaders, law enforcement officers and others.



Though the cattle car is a replica, it's hard not to feel dread as the wooden floor creaks below you and the metal handle clanks and shudders with a sound of booming finality as the door is slammed closed, engulfing you in the dark. Small slivers of light peek through the slats, serving as the only escape from the blackness.

There, students heard the stories of the two Holocaust survivors as words, photographs and portrayals of victims were projected onto the walls.



They heard the cattle car described as "the transition between being a human being and becoming a number."

In addition to learning about the Holocaust, educators aimed for the experience to promote acceptance and combat hates of all kind.



"This event is a profound opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations about respect, empathy and communication," said Michael Ballone, superintendent of Marlboro Township Public Schools, during a dignitary event held on April 3 at Marlboro Middle School that included educators, faith leaders, members of law enforcement, civic and elected officials, education professionals and representatives of [3GNY](#) (an educational nonprofit organization that brings third-generation descendants of Holocaust survivors together) and the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education.

"Respect is the root that grounds us, empathy is the trunk that connects us, and unity is the canopy that shelters us all. When we cultivate these attributes we grow a world where everyone belongs," Ballone continued.



Students also interacted with an exhibit of artifacts ranging from a concentration camp uniform and yellow Star of David patch worn by Holocaust victims to propaganda in forms ranging from a children's book to posters to a Hitler Youth sports jersey.

The one item that often surprises students most is a Hitler alarm clock made in the United States before the war, according to Jori Reiken, lead educator at Hate Ends Now.

"Learning that it was made in the United States rather than in Europe or Germany or Poland really makes them think about what was going on in the United States during this time period," she said.



She said students also often connect with the children's artifacts, such as books.

"They can think back to what they were learning in kindergarten, grade one, grade two and take a look at what these kids were learning and what books they were being read or reading, and really understand how hatred went to every part of somebody's life, allowing people to believe that some of this was OK," Reiken said.

Dr. Stacy Gallin, director of CARMA, and Wendy Tepper, an educator and speaker from 3GNY, gave students lessons before and after they went through the cattle car experience and helped train teachers how to present lessons on the Holocaust.

Tepper, interim education and outreach coordinator for 3GNY, is a Marlboro resident and longtime educator who helped develop the curriculum for the program.

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They focused on "how to engage the students and to make them understand that this happened 80 years ago, but how is it relevant today? And how are we going to change and be upstanders and fight against injustice," she said.

Months ago, Tepper told students the story of her grandfather, Oscar Cukierman. Originally from Poland, he was packed into a train of cattle cars with thousands of others.

He was one of only 11 people to step off.

The personal story helped the students to connect to the lessons learned, she said.

"I think it inspired a lot of students. I was in the cattle car with some of them and they mentioned him. They were like 'oh, Grandpa Oscar was in one of these,' they remembered that. He would have been so proud," she said.



Middle-schoolers are a key age range for this exhibit, said Reiken, of Hate Ends Now.

"They're just starting to learn a little bit about the Holocaust and about history. Bringing this exhibit, they get to hear from two Holocaust survivors in the space, and they get to ask us questions," Reiken said. "They really get a deep dive into the history at an age-appropriate level, and they walk away really understanding and remembering this history.

"As they move forward into high school and into college, they have the information and really focus on inspiring students to stand up in the world around them, so whether they see bullying, hatred, discrimination, we hope that they will take what they learned here and stand up against it," she continued.