

The Holocaust: 'Everybody's story is a miracle of survival'

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As founder and former Vice President of the Holocaust Education Resource Council (HERC), Rita Blank firmly believes in learning, reaffirming and sharing our cultural and personal histories. This mission is the driving force behind HERC, which she began with Barbara Goldstein. Both Goldstein's and Blank's parents were Holocaust survivors.

Blank's parents met and married post-World War II after embarking on a new life in the United States. Growing up in South Carolina, they did not talk about the horrors they endured. In fact, it wasn't until Blank's own daughter interviewed her parents and won a statewide essay contest that Blank fully became aware of the intimate details her mother's experience.

"Everybody's story is a miracle of survival," says Blank. "The opportunity to meet survivors and hear their stories never leaves you. It's not easy for them to tell their stories, so it means a lot that we get to hear them."

Blank will be recognized this year at the annual HERC Remembrance Dinner on Oct. 23 with the 2018 Honorary Founders' Award. Blank served as Vice President from 2009-2016 and is still involved and serving on many committees for HERC.

The foundation of the organization was laid 15 years ago and it all started with a phone call. Blank was asked by an elementary school teacher to speak to a fifth-grade class about her parents' stories, so she paired up with Goldstein — who had received similar requests — and took on the responsibility of keeping this vital piece of history alive.

Visiting and speaking to classrooms came naturally to Blank, who graduated from the University of South Florida with a degree in elementary education. She remarks that while her own schooling did not cover Holocaust history, she felt believed the impact she and Goldstein were making was invaluable to these young students.

"I always remember connecting with the children's eyes and them listening to me so intently," says Blank. "I thought about how they could become more tol-



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If you go

What: Holocaust Education Resource Council Annual Remembrance Dinner

When: 5:30-9 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 23

Where: FSU Turnbull Conference Center, 555 West Pensacola Street

Cost: \$100 per ticket

Contact: For more information, call 850-443-9649 or visit www.holocaustresources.org.

erant and compassionate and learn from the lessons of the Holocaust."

Adapting her parents' stories from speeches they gave at conferences later in life, as well as research on other survivors and liberators, Blank compiled information that would later form the base of HERC's teacher workshop curriculum.

Additionally, She immersed herself in literature about the Holocaust and has been particularly drawn to the sto-

ries of Anne Frank, Jodi Picoult's "The Storyteller," Markus Zusak's "The Book Thief," and Nicholas Winton's "Lottery of Life." Even when the books don't focus on the history, Blank appreciates how they teach lessons on morality and doing what's right in the face of adversity.

"We see the terrible consequences of hatred and I think it's important to ensure that these lessons live on to teach future generations," says Blank. "Studying the Holocaust and becoming educated on it is a human issue because it affects all of us. It's not just Jewish people, but human beings who should be treated kindly and respectfully and students learn they need to stand up for what's right."

Blank and Goldstein are proud of how their efforts have rippled outward to make even greater changes in the Tallahassee community. They are also grateful to the National Council of Jewish Women the first organization to sponsor HERC and gave them "their wings to fly."

HERC has grown exponentially from

its beginnings, which relied heavily on volunteers and local educators before former governor Lawton Chiles put forth a state mandate that the Holocaust would be taught in all grades. Later, HERC introduced essay and art contests as a part of the educational curriculum.

"The first year had 300 children participating, then we realized some children can better express themselves through art so we added that component," says Blank. "It's so interesting to see through the children's eyes, and how they interpret the lessons that they learned."

However, the crowning event for Blank is the annual HERC dinner where hundreds of community members come together to share a night of remembrance and gratitude. She is thankful for long-time HERC member Susan Turner for providing such a delectable spread of Jewish foods, many which can be found in the HERC cookbooks that compile survivors' stories alongside family recipes.

Out of all the dishes, Blank is partial to her mother's recipe for Rugelach, a cream-cheese pastry filled with raisins, chocolate and nuts.

The proceeds from the dinner go towards educational resources for HERC, including stocking the trunks of Holocaust books, films and supplies that circulate school classrooms. Regardless of cultural heritage or ties to the Holocaust, Blank says the dinner is always an evening of unity. She feels especially honored to be receiving the founder's award this year.

"It's something that I share with Barbara because without her we never would have kept going and growing," says Blank, who is inspired to see how many people in the community HERC has been able to touch over the years. "My mom used to tell me to be strong. Even through all that she endured, she had a really positive outlook on life and I think she gave me that hope. My father didn't show a lot of emotion but did always tell me to make him proud, and I hope I've done that."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).