



The Scroll

## MEETING A HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR INSPIRED ILLINOIS STUDENTS TO ESTABLISH GENOCIDE MUSEUM IN THEIR HIGH SCHOOL

'I was motivated to apply the stories I heard to my own life and do the same with my community'

By [Gretchen Rachel Hammond](#)  
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On the evening of April 13, Holocaust survivor, author, activist and public speaker Aaron Elster passed away at the age of 86.

As the first Vice President of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, Elster was a constant and beloved presence in at the Skokie, Illinois facility, and he talked to everyone, from those browsing in the bookshop to groups of students from all over the country who came to hear the story of his narrow escape from the liquidation of the Sokolow Ghetto when he was a boy.

The morning after his death, docents tearfully hugged each other before the arrival of more bus-loads of students. The sense of irreplaceable loss permeated every corner of the museum and, from volunteer to CEO Susan L. Abrams, it was clear that the museum's staff were not just mourning the loss of a family member but a critical protector against the danger of forgetting.



The day before Elster died, a survey was released that showed 22 percent of millennials had never heard of the Holocaust.

Even though Elster had immortalized his story, character, and heart as one of 12 of the museum's groundbreaking, interactive holograms, technology could never completely replace his passion to bequeath young people with the power to never allow hatred to stand.

"Hate still fills our world. What have we learned? People are always looking for someone to blame. That is why you must make the change in your world and I believe you have the power to make the change." Those words were not only the denouement to Elster's book but a message he tried to press home to every student he met including a small group of eight sophomores from Streamwood High School outside of Chicago.

Each a student in Streamwood Social Studies teacher Jaimee Shearn's class, they attended a Student Leadership Forum at the

museum in the Fall of 2017.

“The day was geared towards taking action,” Shearn recalled. “Kids from all over the area discussed social justice and human rights issues in the community and the world. There were a few speakers, including Aaron, who challenged them to come up with tangible solutions.”

With Elster’s story and challenge reverberating in their minds, the eight students formed a club they called Be the Change, drawing the name from one of Mohandas K. Gandhi’s most quoted lessons: “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

Streamwood Sophomores Mariely Sotelo and Lynise Gutierrez helped shape the club’s purpose.

“I was motivated to apply the stories I heard to my own life and do the same with my community,” Sotelo said. “Here at Streamwood high school, there is discrimination and cyber bullying on social media. I feel like the kids here are very humble but, at the same time, their emotions take over their actions.”

“In the lunchroom, you can see divisions; [students’] sitting separately rather than together as a diverse group,” Gutierrez added.

Eight students setting out to change the culture of an entire school was a daunting prospect.

“In the beginning we were all over the place,” Sotelo admitted. “But we started to build plans off each other.”

It was a recollection of one of Elster’s lessons around which the first of those plans solidified.

“Aaron was talking about how, throughout all his experiences, words were more powerful than actions,” Gutierrez said.

“It was the one phrase every student had in their minds,” Sotelo added. “At first we were all confused. We thought it was the opposite. But we realized the extent of the damage words can do and we wanted to do something positive, so we took that into the school.”

“We emphasized both equality and individuality,” Shearn noted. “That there are ways to accept a diverse population instead of putting people into boxes before getting to know them.”

Practically, that involved the eight students taking every opportunity to complement their peers, particularly those outside of their own social groups.

“I met two new kids; one from El Salvador and the other from Massachusetts,” Sotelo said. “They were both new to my gym class and I started talking to them and tried to make them feel welcome.”

“I would try to complement a person every day,” Gutierrez asserted. “There was one girl who I passed by and I said ‘I really like your hair.’ You could see it in her eyes; how she took it in and how it changed her day.”

Emboldened by their own words, Be the Change set out to create something that could not only affect a single day but an entire outlook.

The idea of opening a Genocide Museum on Streamwood’s campus was seeded with Shearn but, to both her pride and astonishment, not only the club but all of her Sophomore students “took it and ran with it.”

“They formed themselves into groups who each took a research project on six genocides; the Holocaust, Armenia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur and Cambodia,” Shearn said. “They created an instillation that became a part of the museum. The Be the Change club worked on the rest.”

Over the course of four months, the students developed tri-folds and websites which, through a combination of photographs and survivor stories, were devastating in their impact. To add extra weight, a physical object representing each genocide was crafted including the landscape of skulls left by Pol Pot, a portrait of a family extinguished in Bosnia, and a bloodied doll representing a child of Armenia’s forgotten genocide.

The exhibits were placed in chronological order in the school’s library, and were introduced by a video defining the eight stages of genocide and the unequivocal need for “Never Again” to be seared into humanity’s future.

Be the Change followed the exhibits with silhouetted representations of any attack on a human being whether verbal or physical: the victim, offender, encourager, bystander and ignorer.

“Have you ever laughed at an offensive post or snap? Have you ever laughed with a crowd at a racist joke?” One silhouette asked.

Finally, a full-length mirror invited people to take a long look at themselves.

The museum opened on April 2 and, over the course of the day-and-a-half it was presented, over 500 Streamwood students and hundreds of teachers, parents, and members of the community walked down its pathways through history and towards the future.

The affect was palpable. As part of the museum's Action Lab, a wall which invited visitors to make a personal pledge towards being their own change became completely covered with post-it notes promising everything from "I pledge to stop wars" to "standing for what is right" to "protecting those around me."

"My classroom will always be a safe place to learn," wrote one teacher.

Be the Change also wanted to make sure there was a sense of accountability. Visitors were invited to write their pledges in letters to their future selves.

Those letters will be mailed back to their authors during the last week of Streamwood's school year.

The Be the Change club (which, by then, had grown from eight to 15 members) took on the roles of docent and teacher.

"We sat in groups and asked people 'what did you learn?' 'How were you impacted?' 'What are you going to do?'" Gutierrez said. "I had a friend who didn't know about the kinds of bullying and said 'I am going to stop it.'"

"I was just blown away," Shearn said. "The students who came through were respectful of the docents and the material. They took their time. They really thought about it. It definitely struck a nerve."


Eleven days later, the Be the Change students heard that Elster had passed away.

"It was really hard for me," Gutierrez admitted choking back tears. "I didn't know him, but I felt like I knew him."

Elster's hologram and book will continue his mission but it was something Gutierrez said which demonstrated that, in life, he had accomplished everything he set out to do.

"His word

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