

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now How holocaust education is shifting in Minnesota
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CATHY WURZER: Tomorrow is Holocaust Remembrance Day. January 27, 1945 is the day that the Auschwitz concentration camp was liberated. And on that anniversary, we honor the victims of the Holocaust.

Even though one of the most horrific genocides in history occurred less than 80 years ago, according to the Institute on Holocaust Education, 10% of American millennials and Gen Z do not believe or are not sure that the Holocaust happened. And almost 60% of that age group believes something like the Holocaust could happen again.

Ellen Kennedy has worked for more than 20 years to set the record straight and to prevent a similar event from ever happening again. Ellen is the executive director and founder of World Without Genocide, a human rights organization based at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law in the Twin Cities. Ellen Kennedy, thanks for joining us.

ELLEN Thank you. It's a pleasure to be with you, Cathy.

KENNEDY:

CATHY Wow, that figure, 1 in 10 American adults under 40 doubt that the Holocaust happened? It's a fact that it happened. What's behind the uncertainty for so many people?

WURZER:

ELLEN One of the most powerful steps in every genocide is the final step, and that step is labeled denial. And we know that there are Holocaust deniers whose messaging is seen everywhere. It is truly rampant. It's on social media, it's in music, and it is this kind of messaging that encourages people to believe in a false story.

KENNEDY:

CATHY What's the education system responsibility in regards to this misinformation?

WURZER:

ELLEN You're raising a very interesting question. In a number of states, it is mandated that in public schools there should be education about the Holocaust in secondary schools. That's not true throughout the country. It also is unclear exactly what that education does in terms of meeting certain goals.

KENNEDY:

For me, the goal is not only to educate people about the veracity of issues like the Holocaust and other human rights atrocities, but to teach them how to stand up calmly, quietly, safely, of course, when they hear groups of people being demonized, when they hear denial being spread, when they hear their own neighbors or their friends being targeted with incitement, being targeted as being responsible for economic problems, for other kinds of ills in the world.

So it has to be more than education. It has to be education with action connected to it with what we call how to become an upstander, not merely a bystander.

CATHY Talk about that, the upstanding. What are you looking for? What are you hoping for?

WURZER:

ELLEN Well, a Holocaust survivor who lived in our community here in Minnesota for many years once said to me that people who were bystanders were as guilty of the atrocities that occurred, whether-- he's talking about the Holocaust or the genocide in Rwanda or elsewhere as if they were the perpetrators themselves.

KENNEDY:

To be a bystander means to lend tacit acceptance for what is going on. If we go back and look at some of the photographs of early days in the regime of the Third Reich, there are pictures of Jewish people who were pulled out of their homes and they were forced to scrub the cobblestone streets on their hands and knees with toothbrushes.

Now, this was long before Auschwitz was constructed, for example, long before the extraordinary horrors that we know about. And the most awful thing about these photographs is that there were crowds of German people surrounding these Jews who were suffering this gross violation of their human dignity.

And the people who were watching, who were literally the bystanders were doing nothing. Some of them were smiling, some were pointing. And it looked like, if we could hear them, they were laughing. It would have taken very little for some of them to have crouched down and joined the Jews on those cobblestones, which, of course, would have broken what was happening with the humiliation at that moment.

So to be a bystander says, we allow this to go on, we accept it. And people need to understand the consequences of being a bystander. I fear that they don't, Cathy.

CATHY

WURZER:

I remember talking to a German resident who was a part of that action back in the day. And she said, we were afraid of the Nazis. So we kind of went along to get along in a sense. And how do you break through, say, an individual's fear of not wanting to rock the boat when they do see anti-Semitism?

ELLEN

KENNEDY:

This is what we encourage people to do. We encourage them all the time to try to stand up, as I said a moment ago, quietly, safely, not putting themselves in jeopardy. And to remember that if they have this desire to stand up, they're not alone. There are others who are feeling it also.

We say to our students and to community members, if you are in a group and you feel that you are alone standing up, you need to know that this issue is occurring around the world and that there are people just like you so well-intentioned and so ethically motivated who are standing up in similar places all over the world.

Upstanders are never alone in the spirit and in the goodness of what it is they are doing. Occasionally, people do stand up knowing full well that they are doing something at great risk to themselves. And we applaud them.

But we don't encourage ordinary people to put themselves in harm's way. We encourage them to speak privately, quietly to reach out as best they can, and particularly to reach out, Cathy, to those people who are being targeted and victimized. To be a friend, to say, I will be a supporter for you. I am here. I will lend you strength and courage. You are not alone.

A number of years ago, you might recall that the presidential administration, again, several years ago wanted to construct a registry of all Muslims living in the United States.

And there were good people from all throughout the country of different faiths and of no faiths who said, if that comes to pass, we will put our names on that registry as well. It is that kind of action that I'm speaking about. It's standing with and for and alongside the people who are being targeted.

CATHY

WURZER:

Ellen, I have about a minute left. And I'm sorry to ask you this question with just a minute left, but what drives you to do this work, educating individuals about the Holocaust and genocide in general?

ELLEN KENNEDY: I'm Jewish, Cathy, and I grew up in a community with very few Jews. When I was in first grade, a little boy in my class said to me during recess, what nationality are you? And I knew enough to say, I'm an American. And he looked at me very straight in the eye and he said, no, you're a Jew. I was in first grade and that sense of being othered, of being singled out, of being marked really made an impression on me.

My parents were very involved in human rights work. And as a Jew, I learned in my synagogue a phrase in Hebrew, "tikkun olam." And it means repair of the world. This is what we were told is our purpose on Earth. And I truly take that very seriously. If not here for tikkun olam, then for what?

And it's a responsibility and an obligation that I believe we all can take on in our small ways, in our neighborhoods, in our communities, or in larger ways as well to honor human rights, which are the rights that are given to all of us just by dint of being human beings.

CATHY WURZER: Ellen Kennedy, I'm going to leave it there. Thank you for your work and thank you for joining us today.

ELLEN KENNEDY: Thank you, Cathy.

CATHY WURZER: Ellen Kennedy is the founder and executive director of World Without Genocide, a human rights organization at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law.