

Coming together for social justice, awareness, tolerance

By Tamara Cryar

Special to The Jewish Outlook

An awakening is taking place in this city. Many Austinites have been moved to raise awareness of prejudice and social justice issues in hopes of bettering the world — starting with Austin.

Some of the most organized participants in this endeavor have labeled their efforts “Light: The Holocaust and Humanity Project,” but the goings on toward the ultimate goal of promoting tolerance extend beyond that defined by any one group. The effort is a convergence of individuals and organizations across all lines of religion and ethnicity.

“Light: The Holocaust and Humanity Project” is a cooperative of many organizations that have partnered to promote tolerance of diversity and to protect against hatred through the arts, educational programs and public dialogue. A key focus of the project is Holocaust education for teachers, students and citizens of Austin, but that’s only the beginning.

Participants in the project see Holocaust education as an excellent place to begin, as an area that should be more widely acknowledged and better understood for what it was — and is — to the Jewish community and the community at large.

Kirk and Amy Rudy, members of the Light project’s advisory committee, have been pleased at the community response/

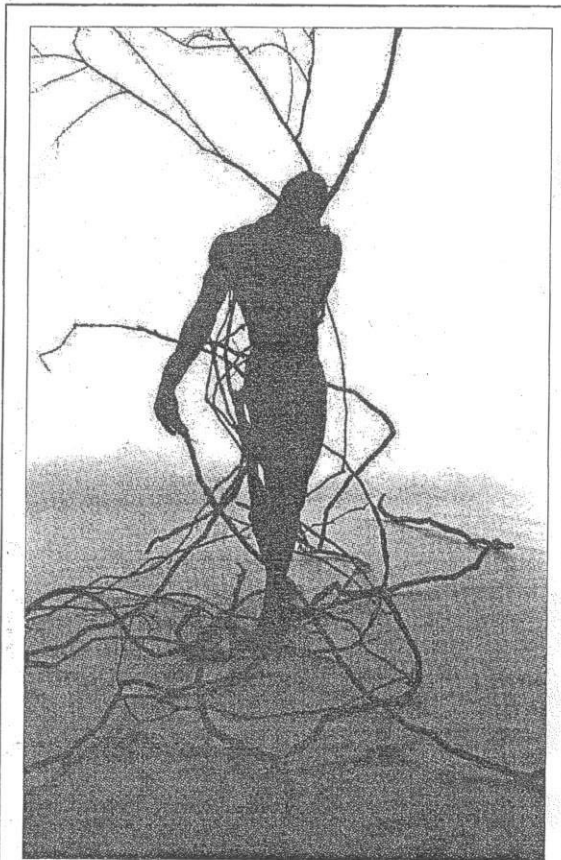
“This is a community issue and a worldwide topic,” Amy Rudy said. “We really wanted to start a conversation within and around the community about acceptance and hatred. Community participation has been fantastic. The wonderful challenge for us is keeping our focus because there is just so much that can be done.”

Indeed, many activities and events are being planned or already in place, some of them having been initiated years before the Light project was even given a name.

‘PAPER CLIPS’

An excellent example of the kind of activity that exemplifies the growing movement is story of one middle school in Tennessee, which is depicted in the documentary film “Paper Clips.” The film tells how Principal Linda Hooper, along with some students and teachers, took an original approach to Holocaust education and tolerance.

“Paper Clips” opened the Austin Jewish Film Festival on Saturday, Jan. 29 (see Page A3). The film, a testament to the difference a community can make, is just one example of the Austin effort to promote tolerance and awareness.



‘Light/The Holocaust and Humanity Project’ is a collaborative effort of Ballet Austin, UT’s College of Education, the JCAA, the Holocaust Museum Houston, the Warren Family Foundation and the Austin Independent School District.

‘Behind curtain’ of ballet

A photographic and multimedia art exhibition, “Behind the Curtain: Light/The Holocaust and Humanity Project,” will be on display at the Dell Jewish Community Campus.

The exhibit will start in late February and continue through the end of March.

Hosted by the Jewish Community Association of Austin’s Visual Arts Committee, “Behind the Curtain” is a collaborative effort with Ballet Austin.

The exhibit portrays the ballet behind the curtain and depicts the creative process of Stephen Mills, artistic director of the ballet, for their performance of “Light” The Holocaust and Humanity Project,” scheduled April 1-3.

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Sandy Sack, co-chair of the Jewish Film Festival committee and a member of Congregation Agudas Achim's arts committee, which initiated the festival three years ago, said, "In part because of 'Paper Clips,' we've been able to collaborate with other arts entities and educational groups to provide the city with something that I think will be very meaningful for the community."

Also hosted in part by the Jewish Community Association of Austin in conjunction with the Light project, three public lectures on the Holocaust are scheduled this spring. The series includes Elie Wiesel, renowned Jewish author and speaker, in late March.

Also, a special event central to the Light project and continuing the theme of Holocaust awareness and education is the ballet that shares its name. Stephen Mills, director and choreographer at Ballet Austin, has developed a ballet that artistically explores the Holocaust. In the process, Mills and his staff have undertaken a tremendous amount of study of the Holocaust.

Cookie Ruiz, executive director of Ballet Austin and long-time colleague and friend to Mills, said, "Stephen is trying to use art to engage the community in an important conversation on the topic of tolerance. He has undergone intense study and been entrusted with the stories of over 25 survivors of the Holocaust."

The ballet, with five sections and no intermission, is designed to create tension. The music is a collection of many eastern European composers and Philip Glass. Performances are scheduled April 1-3.

A public art installation from the Museum of the Seam, titled "Coexist," continues the exploration of these themes through art. The intense art exhibit comprises the works of an international artistic contest on the topic of coexistence and tolerance. Free and open to the public March 5-31, "Coexist" will be held at Auditorium Shores or another equally accessible public site.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Organizers are hoping that these community events will be a springboard for the public to get involved in a long-term dialogue. Their goal is for the community to take part beyond the scope of each event so that the effects for the community are everlasting. To this end, beyond arts events, programs are being developed in an effort to influence local public schools.

As part of the Light project, Dr. Mary Lee Webeck has

played a critical role in developing a Holocaust program for educators in Austin and surrounding areas. She is an assistant professor in social studies education at the University of Texas-Austin. With assistance from the Naomi and Martin Warren Family Foundation, Webeck and her staff are developing learning experiences around Holocaust and genocide education that Austin teachers can take to the classroom.

She has worked closely with Brent Hasty, an Austin arts and education consultant who is involved with the Light project. He has been partner and colleague to the ballet's Mills for years and accompanied Mills, along with others, to Israel, Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic. The trip was not only preparation for the ballet, but also a starting point for the educational efforts they hope to put forth in Austin schools.

YAD VASHEM

Their trip to Israel included three days at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, which were considered critical to what they want to pass on to educators here.

Hasty said, "Their teaching philosophy is outstanding. We will be able to use what we learned to really help these teachers."

They pass on that knowledge with weeklong instruction for student teachers. Each year, 20 or more UT students in training to be elementary or high school teachers receive a week of Holocaust education. Cooperation from the Austin Independent School District makes it possible for substitutes to teach so the UT students can attend the workshops.

The improvements made here may reach beyond the city limits.

Dr. Webeck said, "We hope this project will go forth from Austin to other cities. We want to develop a programmatic model for how schools and artistic organizations can work together to tackle huge projects and big ideas."

Like others, Webeck is struck by the community's response to solving issues of social justice.

"The Holocaust is a human experience and should have involved all of us, not just Jews," she said. "We are obviously still facing genocidal situations in the world, and we need to be smart. We have a lot of work to do. I believe that teachers and schools need to be provided with historically resonate experiences. That's one of the reasons I am so thrilled to be involved with this."

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Educating teachers on these subjects is considered an important first step to children's learning, but Light project participants also see school leadership as key in instigating change. As shown by the principal's role in the Paper Clips project in Tennessee, leadership is needed to promote and enable teachers to institute new ideas and programs.

Long before hearing about the Light project, Dr. Juanita Garcia, director of the Principalship Program at UT, and her staff were conscious of the importance of the leadership within schools and its impact on the success of teachers and students. When she first heard about "Paper Clips" and the success of Principal Hooper, Garcia said, she knew she was witnessing an example of precisely what she was hoping to accomplish with her own program.

Garcia has been a supporter of the film, the Austin Jewish Film Festival and the Light project, as they parallel the goals she has been working to accomplish with UT's Principalship Program, she said.

"Our passion is leadership development at all levels, especially in the realms of social justice and instructional leadership. We want to create the conditions for teachers and students to be truly effective," Garcia said. She said the result of activities taking place in Austin far outweigh any one event.

Light project

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"We are all working on these themes of social justice in different ways, some through art, some through leadership development, some through curriculum. I'm very excited about the possibilities," she said.

Many of these events are ongoing. The education and Principalship programs could affect the daily lives of students and teachers for years to come. Some of the arts events could open the community's eyes to the needs of the world at-large and evoke participate in the conversation that has been initiated

In April, an invitation to participate in this conversation will be formally extended to the city. Linda Ellerbee, an award-winning journalist, producer and author, will facilitate an intergenerational town hall meeting.

Ruiz described the event as another opportunity to be true to the Holocaust and to transform the city into a meaningful community of willing participants who refuse to be bystanders to hatred and bigotry.

"Perhaps we cannot change the world, but we can accept 100 percent responsibility for our own community and make sure there is no tolerance for racism and bigotry here," Ruiz said.

The Austin community has been getting involved.

Hasty said, "We find daily that some other organization has a similar or related activity or motif. Our interest with the Light project is not in the discrete boundaries of the project, but in the mission that is being accomplished. And it is being accomplished in many ways throughout the city.

"It is this spirit of cooperation and willingness to work hard to ensure that we're thoughtful in our actions and our treatment of others that is really the crux of the matter. It really speaks well of Austin."

In addition to those mentioned above, many other individuals and organizations in Austin are working to increase awareness of social justice issues and rid the community of prejudice, bigotry and hate.

Among the hundreds involved are Elizabeth Christian, Sherry Field, Dr. Pat Forcione, David Goldblatt, Mark Lit, Michele Martin, Dr. Dru McGovern-Robinett, Tom Meredith, Alan Potash, Joan Shiring, Dr. Judy Yudof, Mark Yudof, Gov. Rick Perry and former Gov. Ann Richards as well as the staffs and volunteers at the Naomi and Martin Warren Family Foundation, Holocaust Museum of Houston, UT, Ballet Austin, Austin Independent School District and the JCAA.

For more information about the Light project or upcoming ballet, contact Ruiz at cookie.ruiz@balletaustin.org or 476-9151, ext 110. For more information about Garcia's and Webeck's programs, contact them at jgarcia@mail.utexas.edu and webeckm@mail.utexas.edu, respectively. Also, go online to www.jcaaonline.org.