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ARTEFFECT



For Genocide Awareness Month this April, I wanted to do something meaningful with my students. I teach several sections of US II History Honors and a Genocide and Film course for high school juniors and seniors at Immaculate Heart Academy. As a 2020 Alfred B. Lerner fellow with the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous and a 2023 ARTEFFECT Ambassador fellow with the Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes, I incorporated the spirit of what it means to be heroic, even when the world itself seems to have lost its moral compass.

I started by creating three large panels outlining 1) the definition of genocide, 2) the risk factors for genocide, and 3) unsung heroes of genocide. Next, I gave students a project that combined research and creativity researching a person who, at great personal risk to themselves, tried to help victims of genocide find comfort and safety. To begin, students had to identify an unsung hero by using several internet sources: The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous Rescuer Stories, the Unsung Heroes List from the Lowell Milken Center, and more. The students were energized by the stories they read, often sharing with one another what they found.

After they decided on a hero's story to interpret, students used both primary and secondary sources to write an Impact Statement on their heroes. It was exciting to see how enthusiastic they were to do this research, many of them finding primary sources by searching for articles and diary entries, some of which written by the heroes themselves.

The final phase of the project was to create a piece of art that depicted Heroic Actions and Heroic Traits of their unsung hero, based on the criteria provided by the Lowell Milken Center. Some students used photographs and paraphernalia about their hero, and others decided to paint or draw. The primary goal was to activate both critical and creative thinking in students so that they would feel a deep connection to the people who suffered under genocide and to those who were exemplary in standing up to oppression. Through this project, students embraced the idea that one person truly can make a difference, and that sometimes the best part of our humanity shines brightly in the face of darkness and evil.

Little did I know that this classroom project would not end there. I spoke with our local library about my students' efforts, and I was happily surprised when Laura Rifkin, the director of the Township of Washington Library, offered us a spacious room for the month of April for students to display their work in honor of Genocide Awareness Month. In addition, the students will be giving presentations to the public on April 18, educating people not only about genocide, but also about the many unsung heroes who risked (and sometimes gave) their own lives to help others. We will also display student work in the main foyer at Immaculate Heart Academy. I could not have asked for a more fitting conclusion to this project. Sometimes things take on a life of their own, and on rare occasions, students can use their work to enlighten, inform, and to uplift.

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