

## **AHS 10<sup>th</sup> Graders Learn from Holocaust Survivor**

More than 400 sophomores at Alameda High School learned about the horrors of Nazi concentration camps from a Holocaust survivor last month.

The speaker, Ben Stern, was born to Jewish parents in Warsaw in 1921. Between 1939 and 1945, he survived two ghettos, nine concentration camps, and a grueling “Death March” from Buchenwald to the Tryolian Mountains. During the two assemblies AHS organized, Stern and his daughter, Charlene, showed a moving documentary about his experiences (“[Near Normal Man](#)”) and then answered questions from the teenagers in the audience.

AHS tries to organize such assemblies every year for sophomores, who study the Holocaust in their history classes. “Anytime we can provide young learners with first-hand accounts of the history and experiences of members of our community, those learners are enlightened and emboldened to act so that such tragedies are not repeated,” explains AHS Principal Robert Ithurburn. Because of these and other efforts, in the spring of 2016 the Jewish Federation of the East Bay recognized AHS teachers for their exemplary work on educating students about the Holocaust.

### **“We didn’t feel human”**

During the assemblies last month, Stern also provided students with a glimpse into the deep trauma of losing loved ones (all of Stern’s family perished in the ghetto and camps), witnessing unimaginable cruelty, and then trying to create a normal life in the aftermath.

“My wife and I didn’t feel human until we had our first child,” Stern says now. “She was a living thing that came out of us – it was so sweet.”

But Stern and his daughter Charlene (who produced the documentary) also emphasized Stern’s resilience. Throughout all of his experiences, Stern says, he was determined to “go on, to not give in,” despite starvation, illness, and unimaginable loss. “We were half skeletons,” he says of the 7000 other prisoners on the death march. “I barely could walk myself. But I would tell myself, ‘you just got to keep going.’” Only 155 other prisoners survived that march; Stern weighed 78 pounds when the Americans liberated the prisoners.

## **Continuing to fight Nazis**

After the war, Stern and his wife (also a Holocaust survivor) moved to Skokie, Illinois, which at the time had the highest percentage of Jewish residents in the country. There his resilience took a new form. In response to a Nazi plan to march through Skokie in 1977, Stern helped organize a demonstration that attracted 60,000 Jewish people and their allies. The massive show of support disrupted the Nazis' plan. It also sparked a debate about hate speech and the First Amendment that continues to this day.

This past August – a full forty years after his Skokie activism - Stern again led a group of Jewish demonstrators to protest a right-wing rally in Berkeley. And again, the right-wing rally was canceled. Speaking from a flatbed truck, he called on the counter-demonstrators to “rise above hatred” and to never forget the 60 million people who were killed in WWII.

“I hope you recognize that I was once a teen ager just like all of you,” Stern told the Alameda High students. “I have seen things that are so hard to describe to young people. But I decided I would tell my story and I would keep telling it. It is part of how I became human again. We cannot let this happen again.”

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