

Museum of the Courageous: Nyack couples highlight stories that inspire

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David Neil grew up hearing a story from his maternal grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, that has stayed with him throughout his life.

After years of starvation in five different concentration camps, including Auschwitz, his 6-foot-tall grandfather weighed just 88 pounds. He was being transported in a cattle car from Poland to a death camp in Flossenbürg Germany when a stranger slipped him a sandwich.

The man did that at great risk to himself, and my grandfather always said that sandwich saved his life," said Neil, who lives in Nyack. "There are 80 members of my family that were murdered during World War II and the Holocaust. What always stuck with me is that I'm alive today because some stranger stood up to hate."

So in January 2017, when he heard about an incident in Portland, Oregon, where two men lost their lives and a third was injured when they stood up to a man hurling anti-Muslim slurs at two girls, Neil said he knew he had to do something.



Laura and David Neil, left, and Everard Findlay photographed at Memorial Park in Nyack on Tuesday, January 26, 2021. John Meore/The Journal News



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With his wife, Laura, and friends, Nyack couple, Molly and Everard Findlay, he brainstormed ideas around the concept of sharing stories of standing up to hate.

The result is the Museum of the Courageous, a nonprofit dedicated to celebrating stories of people standing up to hate and founded on the belief that powerful narratives compel action.

Earlier this month, MOTC inducted nine honorees to be members of the inaugural "Courageous Class," including a class of fourth graders in California who fought to have the story of the mass deportations of Mexican Americans in the 1930s included in the California State Board of Education's recommended social studies material, as well as the story of Vernon Dahmer, a Mississippi civil rights leader who was murdered in 1966 by the KKK as he fought for Black citizens to freely vote.

Dennis Dahmer, son of Vernon Dahmer, said his family was honored by the recognition.

"Hopefully a story like my dad, an individual who dedicated his life to civil rights and specifically voting rights, will motivate some of the younger generation who maybe are not participating to start participating.," said Dahmer, who divides his time between Louisiana and Mississippi. "We hope that's what his legacy means."

Dahmer also said it was his family's mission that his father's story was accurately recorded and documented it as many places as possible, and that's the goal of MOTC, as well.



Vernon Dahmer, Sr. The Dahmer Family

For Laura Neil, it is all about changing the "algorithm" of what people read.

"I think that we are the stories that we tell," she said. "If you read about hate, you're searching for hate, you find hate. And if you find inspiration, hopefully we can kind of change that narrative and find more inspiration."

Creating a 'museum'

A team of like-minded researchers and writers sought contributions from the public and volunteered to put together pieces highlighting acts of courage, both historic and current, on the nonprofit's website. The group also created awareness for their effort through Times Square billboards.

A community campaign in Detroit to highlight the initiative drew more than 100 people who spoke about what standing up to hate means to them.

"We had 78-year-old Catholic priests to single mothers from African-American communities, people from the Islamic community, Jewish community, and everyone came together," said Everard Findlay, who moved to the U.S. from Trinidad at age 19. "It was very moving."

The Neils and Findlays decided early on that they would bring in a professional executive director on board to manage the operation. Neil is a real estate executive, who sits on the board of many social and environmental nonprofits; Molly Findlay is a set designer and her husband is a branding expert.

They hired Teresa Vazquez, who has more than 20 years of experience in the nonprofit space, to serve as executive director.

"I have heard from people all over the country who are eager to connect to a national story of courage, justice and equality," said Vazquez. "At a time of deep division in our country, when many of us feel disheartened by what we are seeing unfold in our communities and Nation's Capitol, the stories of the Courageous Class offer us inspiration and a pathway forward."



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She was moved by the Pittsburgh Faith Family, one of the museum's honorees, because of their leadership after an attack on three Squirrel Hill congregations left 11 people dead and seven seriously injured on Oct. 27, 2018.

"The violent acts on 10/27 was meant to create division and fear," she said. "But Pittsburgh, led by the faith communities, chose to come together and publicly state that hate has no place in Pittsburgh."

Findlay said having grown up in Trinidad, which he described as a "deeply multicultural society," he is committed to work to make the world a more integrated place.

"As a dual citizen, I feel compelled toward civic duty," he said. "For me, Museum of the Courageous has been an important process to honor people fighting for the good of country in America."

