



Zach Banner's denouncement of antisemitism honored by Museum of the Courageous

good inspiration



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Zach Banner has been educating himself and others about the dangers of antisemitism since summer 2020. Now he's being honored for the courage displayed in standing up for Jews everywhere.

Mr. Banner, a Steelers offensive lineman since 2018, will be a part of the [Museum of the Courageous](#)' 2022 Courageous Class celebrating "historical and contemporary courageous acts that have stood up to hate and shifted our country towards justice," according to a museum news release.

"I accept it humbly because I just feel like I have a platform of being in the NFL and being a Pittsburgh Steeler," Mr. Banner told the Post-Gazette. "I love that and never take it for granted. That is what allows me to be able to

have that message out there, I realize that. ... I just want to be used as a good example to show that there are a lot of really, really good people trying to make this thing work on this planet.”

The fully virtual museum was launched in 2019 as a central hub for “the stories of Americans who have taken an extraordinary stand against hate,” according to the news release. The [inaugural 2021 Courageous Class](#) featured [Pittsburgh’s entire faith community](#) for the way it came together in solidarity following the 2018 mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Squirrel Hill.

In addition to Mr. Banner, the [2022 Courageous Class](#) includes the Dallas Morning News’ 1921 crusade against the Ku Klux Klan, developer Joseph Eichler’s quest to integrate California suburbs in the 1950s, activist Helen Zia’s national movement to confront anti-Asian hate in the 1980s, Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins inspiring Congress to protect the civil rights of those with disabilities in 1990, and the 2015 work of Kym Worthy and Kim Trent on behalf of sexual assault victims.

“After the tremendous response to last year’s inaugural Courageous Class, we know that these profound stories of courage bear the potential to change hearts and minds,” Teresa Vazquez, MOTC’s executive director and a founding trustee, said in a news release. “As we wade toward the two-year mark on the pandemic, this year’s honorees remind us that humanity is at its strongest when it is united against injustice and discrimination.

“We’re immensely proud to celebrate the inspiring 2022 Courageous Class, who have shown that every act of courage, no matter how small, has the potential to push back against hate in a meaningful manner.”

In 2020, Mr. Banner went on social media to [denounce antisemitism in all forms](#) after a series of problematic posts from then-Philadelphia Eagles receiver DeSean Jackson that included an antisemitic quote incorrectly attributed to Adolf Hitler. He was later [joined in his public denouncement](#) of antisemitism by teammate Cam Heyward.

He and Mr. Heyward were one of only a few NFL players (and possibly the only non-Jewish NFL players) to speak out after Mr. Jackson’s posts. To Mr. Banner, it seemed hypocritical to have spent a summer participating in Black Lives Matter rallies and other social justice movements while remaining silent about such an overt act of hate.

“If you’re setting up a lunch table and someone’s making fun of a kid who has Down syndrome, you’re going to say something,” he said. “If you’re on a bus and someone’s harping on someone because they’re big or fat, you’re going to say something. Same thing with antisemitism or hate, in any form.”

Since then, Mr. Banner has continued to be an advocate for the Jewish community. He and former Pirates star Josh Bell [hosted a virtual panel](#) on antisemitism last February, and he has continued to support Jewish causes, including the [Challah Back Girls](#) — four Jewish sisters from New Jersey who happen to be huge Steelers fans — and their efforts to support organizations combatting racial injustice by selling their delicious challah bread.

Mr. Banner recalled sitting down with representatives from the Anti-Defamation League to educate himself on the history of Jewish stereotypes and what modern antisemitism looks like. Thinking about Jews he knows such as the Challah Back Girls experiencing antisemitism reminded him of being teased for being a 5-foot-tall second grader and of experiences he had being “a Black kid going to a high school in a more suburban lifestyle.”

“These little small things hold back a culture and a society of people from making progress,” he said.

Last year was a tough one for Mr. Banner, who tore his ACL early in the 2020 season and was largely unable to take the field in 2021. He acknowledged that “this is an important offseason for me” and he intends to “make the most of it,” which includes working out in the pool at the Squirrel Hill Jewish Community Center.

As grateful as he is for being enshrined in the Museum of the Courageous, Mr. Banner wants to keep the focus on organizations and people doing even more concrete community work. He mentioned showing up to speak at an event in a Homewood park after folks with Bend the Arc Pittsburgh had just spent most of their day building benches there.

“There are so many people who spend hours of community service, going to the JCC, helping little Jewish boys and girls and Black kids,” he said.

“There are so many people who do so much more work than I do. And I just want to represent them humbly.”

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