

Witness to witness: My journey reimagining Holocaust education

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By

Jennifer Wasserstrom Doty

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Third-generation (3G) Holocaust survivor Don Schapira (right) and a photograph of his grandfather Motke as a young man in 1945.

I've spent 30 years as a social studies teacher, and as I approach the final stretch of my career, I keep coming back to the same question: How do we make history matter to young people, especially a history as important, and as vulnerable, as that of the Holocaust?

For years, I've brought Holocaust survivors to my classrooms at Mayfield High School and Oppenheim-Ephratah-St.Johnsville High School in upstate New York. I'll never forget watching my students' faces as Carl Rosner described surviving Buchenwald at age 10 — and going on to become a pivotal contributor to the development of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technology. Or when Murray Yarros, at 90 years old, captivated my class with his story of surviving for four years in the Polish forest, protected by the kindness of neighbors and farmers.

But I also saw the clock ticking. These survivors were aging, their numbers dwindling. Soon, our students would no longer have the opportunity to hear firsthand accounts directly from those who lived through this history.

That's when I met Dave Reckess.

A partnership begins

The conversation sparked an idea. What if we could create a deeper, more interactive experience than the typical classroom presentation? What if students could have genuine conversations with these “3Gs” (third-generation survivors) about not just what their grandparents experienced, but how that legacy shaped their own identities? Could sitting and talking with a 3G prompt students to consider how their own family stories shape their values and choices today?

When Zack Ellis, a 3G himself and founder of the oral history platform TheirStory, joined our collaboration, the pieces fell into place. In TheirStory, Zack had created a platform that could record remote interviews and make them immediately searchable through automatically generated transcripts. His technology would allow my students to record interviews, then revisit, analyze and clip moments from their conversations with 3Gs, turning ephemeral conversations into lasting resources for learning and reflection.

From concept to classroom

I decided to implement this project with two different classes: my “Holocaust History” elective, and my psychology class. The pairing proved fortuitous, as we could explore both historical context and psychological concepts like intergenerational trauma and identity development.

“I’m not going to lie to you: This will push you outside your comfort zone,” I told my students. “You’ll be interviewing adults you’ve never met before about deeply personal stories. But I promise you, it will be worth it.”

I watched as they prepared, researching Holocaust history, crafting thoughtful questions, nervously practicing their introductions. I paired them up, knowing some would need the moral support of a classmate beside them for this intense conversation.

Kaylee, one of my psychology students, sprained her ankle the night before her scheduled interview. When her parents suggested taking her to the ER instead of school, she refused.

“I can’t, I have to be there for this,” she insisted. “I want to be here.”

Witnessing transformation

The day Collin and Lenny, both 17, interviewed Brian Liss, 50, was when I knew we had created something special.

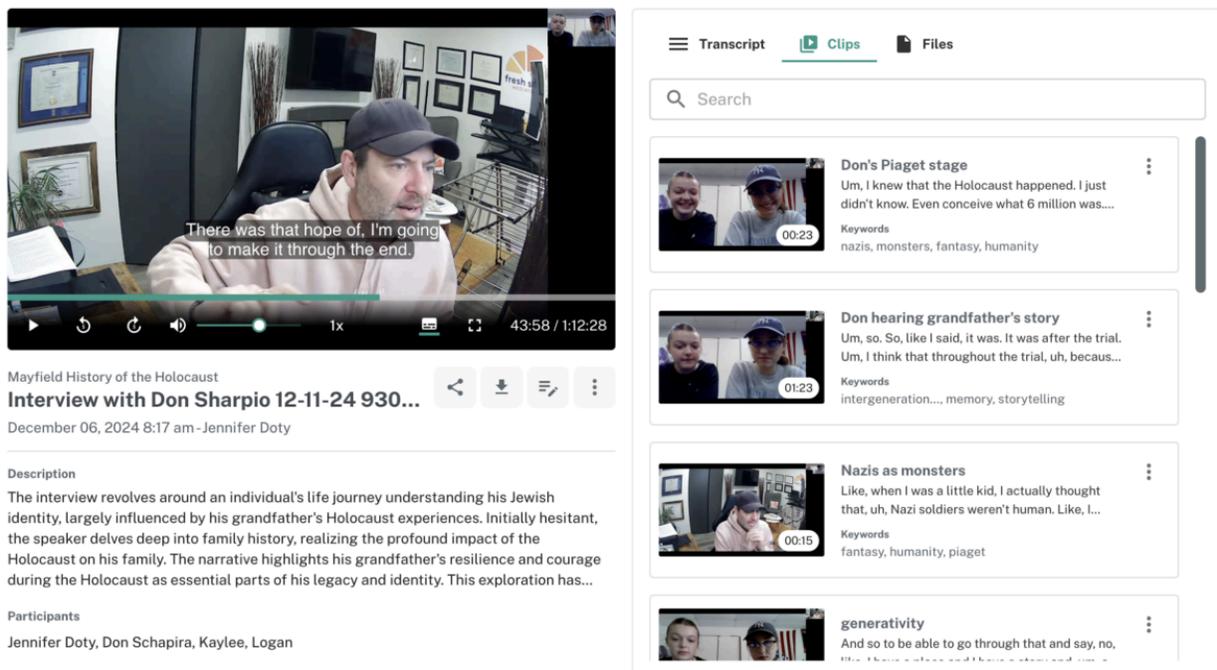
Collin has always been a strong academic student — always very serious — but I had never witnessed his empathic side. But sitting across from Brian (virtually), asking

questions about how Brian’s grandfather survived Dachau concentration camp, something shifted.

When Brian grew emotional describing how his grandfather had been propped up by friends during roll call after a brutal beating, Collin didn’t freeze or turn away. Instead, he paused, acknowledged Brian’s feelings, and continued, all with remarkable empathy. As I fought back my own tears, I looked around and saw my high school seniors mesmerized by this moment; every single student was truly moved by Brian’s vulnerability and Collin’s sensitive response. I had never experienced a “teachable moment” of this magnitude in my 30 years of education.

“This experience was life-changing,” Emily, a student who rarely spoke up in class, later told me. The emotion in her voice was palpable as she described how different it was to hear these stories directly and ask her own questions, rather than just reading about them in books.

Using TheirStory’s platform, my students could revisit these powerful conversations as they prepared to share their learning with their classmates. They’d excitedly call me over during work sessions: “Ms. Doty, listen to this part!” They searched for specific moments that had stuck with them, analyzed responses through psychological frameworks and crafted presentations that wove together history and personal reflection.



The screenshot displays the TheirStory platform interface. On the left is a video player showing an interview with Don Sharpio. The video title is "Interview with Don Sharpio 12-11-24 930..." and it was recorded on December 06, 2024 at 8:17 am by Jennifer Doty. The description states: "The interview revolves around an individual's life journey understanding his Jewish identity, largely influenced by his grandfather's Holocaust experiences. Initially hesitant, the speaker delves deep into family history, realizing the profound impact of the Holocaust on his family. The narrative highlights his grandfather's resilience and courage during the Holocaust as essential parts of his legacy and identity. This exploration has..." Participants listed are Jennifer Doty, Don Schapira, Kaylee, and Logan. On the right is a sidebar with tabs for "Transcript", "Clips", and "Files". Below the tabs is a search bar and a list of four clips. Each clip includes a video thumbnail, a title, a description, and keywords. The clips are: 1. "Don's Piaget stage" (00:23) with keywords: nazis, monsters, fantasy, humanity. 2. "Don hearing grandfather's story" (01:23) with keywords: intergeneration..., memory, storytelling. 3. "Nazis as monsters" (00:15) with keywords: fantasy, humanity, piaget. 4. "generativity" (00:15) with keywords: And so to be able to go through that and say, no, this was a stress and this was a... and...

TheirStory empowered students to easily review, edit and pull clips from conversations. Courtesy/TheirStory

Kaylee and Logan explored how Don Schapira, as a child, had imagined Nazis as literal monsters with fangs and sharp teeth — a perfect example of Piaget’s concrete operational thinking. Connor and Jayden examined how Lori Levitt’s grandmother had

rubbed blood on her sister's cheeks to give her color when she was ill, desperate to make her appear healthy enough to avoid selection for death.

The presentations they created weren't just academic exercises; they were deeply felt interpretations of how the past shapes us. Many students even shared these projects with family members, extending the impact far beyond our classroom walls.

Beyond the assignment

What surprised me most was how this project impacted students in ways that surpassed the academic goals I had set. Jesslin, a student of color in our predominantly white school, found unexpected connection when her 3G interviewee discussed recognizing her cultural differences as a Jewish granddaughter of survivors. "This had an impact on me since I also realized that my culture was different," Jesslin told me. "It really hit me when I started high school, it was little things like words or just the way I grew up that was different from others." It was rewarding to see Jesslin light up as she gained a sense of validation and belonging through her interview.

The 3G volunteers were equally moved. "I was given a little therapy for free by these two young men," Brian joked during our debrief session. Don, calling in from Calgary, told us this experience "is driving a different level of Holocaust education."

"They're not just seeing something," he said. "They're understanding it."

As for me, as an educator with three decades of experience, I'm hardly surprised anymore — and this project blew me away. I watched students who would typically be counting the minutes until the bell become so engrossed in their interviews that they wanted to continue past our allotted time.

A new model emerges

Holocaust education stands at a critical juncture. As the number of survivors dwindles, we must find new ways to preserve their stories and share them in a way that resonates with young people. This project offers a promising path forward.

By combining the personal connection of 3G testimony with the interactive possibilities of technology and the structured framework of classroom learning, we created something that transcends traditional Holocaust education. Students weren't passive recipients of information — they were active participants in preserving and interpreting history.

The day I overheard Collin telling a classmate that he had shared Brian's story with his mom, who then shared it with other family members, I knew we had succeeded. The ripple effect was beginning.

Elie Wiesel famously said: "Listening to a witness makes you a witness." What this project showed me is that when students have agency in that listening — when they can ask their own questions, make their own connections and reflect on their own terms — the impact is profoundly deeper.

As I look toward retirement in the coming years, I take comfort in knowing that the next generation of teachers can adopt and adapt this model. Holocaust education doesn't have to diminish as survivors pass away. Instead, it can evolve into something equally powerful: a conversation across generations about how history shapes us, and how we choose to carry it forward.

Not as spectators. As witnesses.

Jennifer Wasserstrom Doty is a social studies teacher at Mayfield High School.

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