
The Jewish Voice & Herald

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A congregation hears remorse from youthful offenders

By Nancy Kirsch

December 24, 2010

Survivor, Holocaust educator speak to perpetrators



Cantor Richard Perlman and Alice Goldstein prepare to give plants to Ryan G. (whose face is blurred deliberately, so that he, as a minor charged with a crime, can't be identified) and Ryan Johnson. /Source: Nancy Kirsch

WARWICK – “I have more than six million reasons to be angry, but I was determined to teach a lesson that would benefit all of us, especially the community,” said Cantor Rick Perlman of Temple Am David, during a closed meeting of the synagogue’s membership on Sunday, Dec. 12.

Some time ago, Perlman had said those same words to a young man, Ryan Johnson. After confessing that he and his half-brother, Ryan G. (whose name is not being disclosed as he is a minor), had painted a

swastika and a racial epithet on an outside wall of Temple Am David in June 2010, Ryan Johnson asked him, “Why aren’t you angry?”

The Voice & Herald reported on the event in the June 11 issue, “Days of hatred and anger in R.I.”

Charged by the Warwick police with vandalism (a misdemeanor), and by the Attorney General’s office with the felony of desecrating a place of public assemblage, Ryan Johnson, 20, has fulfilled the imposed requirement of 30 hours’ community service at the Holocaust Education & Resource Center (HERC); the final disposition of his case has been deferred until January 2011. Ryan G., 17, was charged with a felony (some of his records are confidential, others are partially redacted, as he is a minor). He fulfilled those same commitments to HERC; today, he remains on probation. Both young men’s commitments to pay restitution for cleanup costs are still pending.

Other than synagogue members and some *pre-b’nei mitzvah* students, only the two young men, Katherine and Tom Johnson (Ryan Johnson’s grandparents), John Moreira, a special assistant attorney general for Rhode Island, and this reporter were present for this special meeting. The young men apologized profusely to the congregation; following their comments, two other congregants – May Ronny Zeidman, HERC director, and Alice Goldstein, a Holocaust survivor – spoke to the congregation.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to apologize enough,”

said Ryan Johnson. “We met with Ruth Oppenheim [another Holocaust survivor] and Alice Goldstein, and we learned a lot [at HERC].”

Ryan G. said, “I am sorry for my stupidity; my actions hurt and offended a lot of people. I didn’t understand the Holocaust until I studied it [at HERC]; I didn’t mean to bring back memories for survivors. Schools don’t go into detail.”

HERC perspective

At HERC, said Zeidman, “I was facing them as a congregant and the HERC director. As a congregant, I was appalled and saddened.” The two Ryans attended three-hour sessions each week for 10 weeks at HERC, completing every assignment, reading every book and asking thoughtful questions, said Zeidman. “These boys weren’t malicious, but [they were] uninformed. They didn’t know enough about Judaism or the Holocaust; they all know that the swastika strikes horror to a Jew, but they don’t know why.” Zeidman had them read and write, and watch historical film clips and survivor testimonies; the film “Paper Clips” drew praise from both young men.

Her voice cracking with emotion, Zeidman urged parents and grandparents at the meeting: “Demand that Holocaust and genocide education be taught in your children’s and grandchildren’s schools. To say nothing is to say ‘yes’ [to ignorance].” (To learn more about the state of Holocaust education in Rhode Island, read sidebar, “What does Rhode Island law require in Holocaust education?”)

At a private meeting with the boys, Johnson’s grandparents and this reporter, Zeidman expressed frustration that the criminal justice system routinely sends offenders to agencies for community service with no structured education component; moreover, the small staff and insufficient resources of many agencies make it difficult to create such a component. These two were the fifth and sixth young men in the past four years who have been court-ordered to attend HERC as part of their community service.

A survivor’s perspective

As it was evidence of a crime, the vandalism could not be cleaned up until the investigation was complete; so the swastika and epithet remained on the synagogue wall as people entered for Shabbat services on Friday, June 4. Alice Goldstein, a survivor, spoke on Dec. 12 to her fellow congregants about that night’s experiences.

“When we met to *daven* the Shabbat services, I knew the swastika was just behind me,” said Goldstein, who is from Kenzingen, Germany. “Knowing it was there shook me. I had thought of the U.S. as a really safe place...[But with this], I realized that there are still reasons to worry here...”

Like Zeidman, Goldstein believes these two young men have gained some understanding. “If they see bullying in school or beyond – words or actions against people who are different – I hope they stop it.”

Education makes an enormous difference, she said, citing efforts in her German hometown. “Teens there know far more than many American Jewish teens do about Judaism,” she said. “Their education has made a big difference in how I feel about going back [to Germany].”

Boys are ‘knuckleheads’

Goldstein and Perlman presented a plant to each boy and to Katherine Johnson, to symbolize the knowledge they have gained from the experience. You can nurture, water and feed the plant and it will grow and flourish, he said. Or you can let it wither and die. “The choice is yours.”

The boys were asked later, “How do you know about swastikas? How did you know they were so hateful to Jews?”

“‘South Park’ [an animated television show],” said Ryan G. “It makes it seem OK to make fun of Jewish people.” A sophomore at a Warwick public high school who works at a Burger King, he will use money from his job to make restitution to the synagogue.

Ryan Johnson, who attends classes at Community College of Rhode Island and works at Dunkin Donuts, will become a father in January 2011. He has grown from this experience, he said, though he wishes he could have matured without having been, as Perlman called him, “a knucklehead.”

“This has turned me into a different person; it changed me for the better. Life isn’t all fun and games; there’s more to it than that,” said Ryan Johnson.

Katherine Johnson, who accompanied the boys to all but one of the 10 weekly sessions, still finds it hard to believe that Ryan Johnson committed this act. Her husband, Tom, she said, was the one who heard the news on television. While expressing deep gratitude to Zeidman and others involved in teaching them all more, she repeatedly wiped away tears.

At the interview’s conclusion, the grandparents and the “two Ryans” hugged Zeidman, who returned the hugs with genuine warmth.

Beyond the Jewish community

Just as the larger community embraced Temple Am David after the incident – a neighbor called the synagogue to report the defacement, police responded promptly and local children (including many who aren’t Jewish) brought in pennies and nickels they had collected to help the synagogue – Perlman hopes to involve the larger community in an education and awareness initiative. “We’ve been talking about the next steps and talking to Pastor Dennis Kohl, of Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Warwick, Marty Cooper [director of the Community Relations Council] and May-Ronny Zeidman about a community forum in the spring,” said Perlman. “We want to teach more people. Ryan Johnson and Ryan [G.] are willing to be speakers at the event.”