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One smart little paper.

Looking History Squarely in the Eye WHRS exhibit confronts prejudice, participation

By Fran Heller

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Choices have consequences:

- A black man agonizes over helping a white woman with small children on an urban subway.
- The citizens of one town take a stand against anti-Semitism.
- Citizens of another town resist efforts at integration.
- A Cambodian refugee struggles to fit in at his American high school.



These four pivotal events form the core of a compelling traveling exhibition called “Choosing to Participate.” Created by Facing History and Ourselves, an international educational organization, each of these stories focuses on choice and the consequences of choice, whether big or small, public or private, personal or history-making. It’s at The Western Reserve Historical Society through Feb. 26.

The multi-faceted interactive display combines video, audio, illustrations and text to illuminate each story. This not-to-be-missed exhibit is instructive, inspirational, and a transformative experience for students and adults.

Each of these stories has its own “pod,” or station. Each narrative is placed in a larger context with actual examples of how the choices people make impact their families, neighborhoods, country and the world.

Making better choices

The video “Little Things Are Big” was created and narrated by Jesus Colón, a newspaper reporter who boarded a New York City subway late at night. It was the 1950s. The only other passenger was a white woman, struggling with a baby in her arms, a suitcase, and two small children clinging to her side. When Colón sees that the woman would be getting off at the same stop, where the exit from the station is a long, steep flight of stairs, he agonizes over whether or not to help her. As a black man and

a Puerto Rican, would she accept his help, reject it, or scream? What if she wasn't prejudiced after all?

Colón would never find out because he chose to ignore the woman, and these questions would plague him until he died in 1974.

"Sometimes we don't make the right choice or a choice we know is right," says Mark Swaim-Fox, director of the Cleveland office of Facing History. "We can use that to reflect upon to make better choices in the future."



Getting to know others

"Everyone Has a Story" is the narrative of Arn Chorn Pond, a young boy from Cambodia, who was adopted along with two brothers by an American couple and brought to New Hampshire in 1980. He was 14.

Most of Arn's family had died during the Cambodian genocide in the 1970s. The video describes how, at age 10, Arn was forced to work in a slave labor camp, witnessing widespread hunger and death by starvation. When the North Vietnamese

invaded Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge turned him into a soldier. He escaped through the jungle to a refugee camp on the border of Thailand and Cambodia, here he met his future father.

In the United States, Arn was one of the first non-white students to attend his New Hampshire school, where he faced a host of challenges, including learning English and the taunting by fellow students. Arn excelled at sports, which gained him acceptance.

The video depicts the now-adult Arn returning 20 years later to his high school to tell his story. The lesson, Arn tells students, is that "people didn't get to know me, and I didn't get to know other people; we all have a story to share."

This pod also includes a gallery of portraits of teenage immigrants today, who, like Arn 30 years ago, have come to America as newcomers. Seventeen-year-old Tal from Israel moved to Boston with her family when she was in the 9th grade. Tal describes how lonely it is being a foreigner and how friendships in Israel are different than they are in America.

The last two pods juxtapose two communities in crisis and choices that individuals in those communities made in response.

Learning life's lessons

"Crisis in Little Rock" centers on the fateful day when nine black students tried to integrate a segregated high school in Arkansas.

The exhibit sets the stage with black and white portraits of a local café and movie house with separate entrances for white and for colored. A photograph of a drinking fountain for whites only, juxtaposed with an actual replica of a water fountain for coloreds, vivifies this nation's history of inequality.

In September 1957, Elizabeth Eckford and eight other black students, known as the Little Rock Nine, prepared to enroll at the all-white Central High School in Little Rock. The wrenching video presentation is Elizabeth's story narrated by the adult Elizabeth.

The visitor enters young Elizabeth's bedroom, where the neatly pressed dress she would wear that day and her school supplies are on display. She learns that Gov. Orville Faubus had called out the Arkansas National Guard and naïvely assumes they were there to protect her and the other black students. When she arrives at the school, she tries to enter, but the soldiers bar her way.



A picture of the high school appears on a scrim through which the viewer can see the angry faces of a white mob whose jeers and shouting gradually turn into a roar. "Go home, black girl," "lynch her, lynch her," they shout, followed by silence. The visceral effect is chilling.

The viewer can listen to and read the reactions of public officials, teachers, parents and students. One who stood up was Ira Lippman, a Jewish student at Central. In a nationally televised conversation, Ira said he would be willing to go to school with Negroes. Shortly after, death threats were phoned to his home. The very next day, Ira sent a letter to Jewish youth leaders throughout the nation that integration was coming regardless of what the rabid segregationists declared and encouraged them to take a stand.

Standing together

The film "Not in Our Town" tells the story of Billings, Mont., and how the people came together to combat hate and intolerance.

A cinderblock crashes through the window of the home of Tammie and Brian Schnitzer, a Jewish family, in December 1993, where their son Isaac had pasted a paper menorah in his bedroom window.

Tammie went to the local newspaper, which ran a front-page story about the incident. The citizens responded by placing Chanukah menorahs graphics in the windows of their homes. The Jewish population in Billings is about 500 people, and by the end of December, 10,000 people put menorahs in their windows.

"Hate crimes are not a police problem; they're a community problem. Hate crimes and hate activity flourish only in communities that allow them to flourish," noted one public official.

Featured is Frédéric Bronner's now-famous photograph of citizens, including Native Americans, priests, policemen and African-Americans, marching with menorahs. The Jewish French photographer traveled to Billings to document the town's stand against bigotry and anti-Semitism.

This pod also includes four other examples of how different schools and communities answered the call to action in their own neighborhoods. "Not in Our World" focuses on the Ukraine, where hate crimes have escalated at an alarming rate and anti-Semitic graffiti has defaced walls. Members of Project Keshet, a Jewish women's organization based in the former Soviet Union, painted over the graffiti wherever they found it.

Facing history focuses on 'civic engagement'

Mark Swaim-Fox is director of the Cleveland office of Facing History and Ourselves, a professional development organization for middle- and high-school teachers. The nonprofit organization uses history and the lessons of the past, such as the Holocaust and the civil rights movement, to get students thinking about their own decision-making and how they can make a difference in the world.

"One of our goals is to engage our city in a dialogue around civic engagement," says Swaim-Fox. Surrounding events include a film and lecture series, educator workshops and community discourse. "It's important in our community to have this dialogue about how we treat newcomers, how we treat people who are different," he adds.

Cynthia Dettelbach, former CJN editor, is one of the more than 120 docents of "Choosing to Participate." For Dettelbach, there is a personal connection to the exhibit because one of the heroines of "Not in Our Town" is Tammie Schnitzer, whom Dettelbach interviewed several years ago.

"When I take school kids through that "pod," I mention that connection and point out how Schnitzer turned a near-tragic event into a great learning experience for others, not only in her own hometown of Billings, but many times, as she goes around the country telling her story. I also get a kick out of explaining the menorah and the Jewish holiday of Chanukah to inner-city children who are not familiar with these things."

Local participation enhances exhibit



"Choosing to Participate" includes two local components. "pARTicipation: Young Artists Speak Up" features original artwork by area students who explore issues of diversity, intolerance and violence through the visual arts. Tyesha Cole, a senior at St. Martin de Porres High School in Cleveland, drew a picture of a tearful pregnant woman, crying for all the women who have lost their children in Darfur. "Afraid to get out of my car," a photo-essay about transcending the barriers of stereotype and race, was created by Aaron Kohn as a senior at Hawken School, who is also an Upstander.

"Upstanders: Portraits of Courage" profiles 25 individuals and groups from the local community who chose to stand up rather than stand by and help make a difference in the world.

These profiles include members of the Cleveland Jewish community, such as Holocaust survivor Max Edelman, who at 86 continues to share his experiences with students and encourages them to stand up against hatred; Eileen Saffran, founder of The Gathering Place, a haven of support for cancer patients and their families; and Lee Ponsky and Zac Ponsky, founders of MedWish International, a nonprofit that recovers and recycles unused medical supplies for medical care providers in developing countries. As a student organizer, Kohn (now a freshman at Columbia University) helped raise awareness about Africa and saving the culture of the Kalahari Bushmen in Namibia. He also started an exchange program that brings two Botswana students to Hawken each year.