



Traveling exhibit shows students the power of personal choice

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Jon Sward | The New Mexican
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JACONA -- By the time he had finished touring the "Choices: Through the Eyes of Students" exhibit at Pojoaque Valley High School on Thursday, Carlos Llano was wide-eyed.

"It's pretty mind-opening that all this stuff happened," said Llano, a senior at Peñasco High School who attended the exhibit with about 35 classmates.

 Big Picture

Llano wasn't the only one who left the exhibit unchanged. In fact, that's the desired effect.

As the name suggests, the exhibit revolves around the concept of personal choice.

"Choices," which is sponsored by the New Mexico Foundation for Human Rights Projects and was on display in the Pojoaque Valley High School library last week, features 21 bilingual

panels that include pictures and text.

The exhibit draws a parallel between the daily choices young people faced during the Holocaust and those faced by young people today when they witness the human rights of others being violated.

As a whole, the exhibit shows how the personal choices of ordinary people have helped shape history -- and that ordinary people still possess significant agency in the present.

"What we're trying to do is get kids to make a connection between history and today," said Regina Turner, executive director of NMFHRP. "We want them to make a connection between man's inhumanity to man 60 years ago to what's happening today in their city, state and, ultimately, the nation."

The exhibit was created by the Contemporary Holocaust Education Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit. The foundation's president, Cor Suijk, aided German Jews during the war and spent time in a concentration camp before being liberated by Canadian troops after Germany surrendered. His experiences are detailed in one of the exhibit's panels.

Ten students from Pojoaque who were chosen to serve as docents for the exhibit spent a training day with Suijk, 82, on March 2 at Albuquerque Sandia High School.

"It was really interesting," said Victoria Montoya, a junior. "He spent a lot of the day just talking to us about his stories."

The 10 student docents who attended the Albuquerque training day trained 22 of their peers as docents for the exhibit.

One docent, Alegra Roybal, said presenting the exhibit to the public has made her more aware of the importance of contemporary human-rights struggles.

"Right now, there's genocide happening in Darfur," Roybal said. "What's going to happen in 20 years when people ask, 'Why didn't you do anything?' History repeats itself."

Pojoaque High School humanities teacher Susan Quintana, who coordinated the training of student docents, said the exhibit drives home the importance of daily actions.

"Every day in our classrooms and our lives, we make decisions that have an impact on people," Quintana said. "It may not have been to let (the Nazis) take (the Jews) off and kill them, but it's still important."

"Choices" was on display at schools in New Mexico last spring, but its stay in Pojoaque was the first time the exhibit appeared north of Albuquerque,

Quintana said.

The exhibit's appearance in Pojoaque can be partly attributed to donations from the families connected to the school, which helped cover the cost of docent training as well as the appearance fee, according to Turner.

Pojoaque Principal Gloria Shuttles, who attended the exhibit Thursday, said she was impressed by the tour she received from the student docents.

"I think it's a great opportunity for the kids to showcase their knowledge of history and current events," Shuttles said. "And it's important. In some cases, we're only a handful of decisions away from having a similar thing happen in our own times.

"It's so important for kids to know that they're powerful."

The "Choices" exhibit left Pojoaque on Friday and headed south for a stop at Belen High School, where it will be on display this week.

The exhibit is gone, but its message seems sure to linger in Jacona.

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