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Recipients of the 2019 Kron Sigal Award for Excellence in Holocaust Education

Remarks Delivered at 2019 Annual General Meeting of the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre

Nicola and I would like to start by thanking you for inviting us here tonight. We are truly honoured and humbled to be here.

At West Van Secondary, Holocaust education is fundamental to our conception of “education”. We incorporate it in all subjects, especially English, History, Philosophy, Social Justice, Theory of Knowledge, and of course, Genocide Studies. Our department has also just returned from an 11 day student trip to Europe that included the Warsaw Ghetto, the POLIN museum, Auschwitz, the Topography of Terror and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin in the itinerary.

As Social Studies teachers, we are tasked with explaining things that have happened the world over, generations ago. More importantly we are tasked with the lofty goal of having students care about what has come before them to shape the world they live in now. Sometimes that past can appear distant and feel irrelevant to them. This is an unacceptable way for our youth to move into adulthood. Through the VHEC the past can come to life. Through the testimonies of survivors, the past becomes tangible, it becomes human, and it becomes relevant to students. Robbie Waisman, Alex Buchman, Lillian Boraks-Nemetz: they show our students what it means to live through the darkest depths of human actions. How by-standers make it possible for evil people to commit unspeakable acts. They make history human and their stories live in our classrooms and in student memories long after our February morning Symposiums are over. We have them to thank for teaching our students what history really means.

It is, of course, vital that we teach about the past, about survivors and rescuers and remembrance. But we also teach because we hope to influence the future. We both teach our students about the rise in anti-Semitism, in hate crimes, in polarization and in racist politics. We talk to them about the ways these things echo with the history of the Holocaust. But we tell them too about how the same resilience and hope so exemplified by the survivor speakers exists today. When you come and share your stories, you build bridges. You humanize. So many of our students come away from the Holocaust Symposium saying things like “I get it now.” “I didn’t realize, but now I understand.” They understand why the history of the Holocaust matters. And they also understand why they need to speak up for inclusion, and stand against racism and persecution of any kind, from the school hallways to the hallways of power.

Many of our students in West Vancouver have the opportunity to go on to universities all over the world, and to find work in influential places. They carry with them your messages. One of our former students is now a journalist in New York. I remember taking her class to the Holocaust Symposium when she was in grade 11. Last fall she was sent to cover the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting. She decided to write about the Jewish doctors and nurses who saved the life of the shooter. She knew that it was very important to talk about the people who heal, whose goodness triumphs over evil. I think she knew that because of you and the work you do.

Before we finish we just want to acknowledge Cathy Paperny and Ilona Shulman Spaar. They are both incredibly good at their jobs, connecting schools to the VHEC. Cathy it has been such a pleasure working with you and we do wish you all the best. Thank you again, we are truly honoured by this award and to be connected the amazing people of the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre.

