





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Arts & Life

New Documentary Aims to Pass the Torch of 'Never Again' to a New Generation

By Madeline Halpert - 08/10/2020 2:30 PM  69  0



Local artists Curtis Bates and Hailey Callahan tour the Holocaust Memorial Center during the filming of "Shoah Ambassadors." (Photo courtesy of Keith Famie)

Filmmaker Keith Famie is producing a documentary that tells the story of the Holocaust through the personal expressions of young people.

On Jan. 13, 2020, Keith Famie watched Edith Maniker, an 89-year-old Holocaust survivor, speak to a group of high school students about her experience escaping Nazi Germany on the Kindertransport mission. Before the talk, Famie, an Emmy-award winning director and producer, knew nothing about the rescue mission. As he listened to Maniker speak, Famie looked around the room at the group of young students and wondered what they would take away from the conversation.

"Out of the 100 kids there, two to three years from now, how many of them will remember?" he said. "I thought, there have to be more ways to tell this story to the younger generation."

It was after the talk that Famie decided he wanted to take a different approach to a film he was already planning about Holocaust survivors: to share the story through the eyes of a younger generation learning about the tragedy. The educational experiences of the young people, or "ambassadors," will comprise an hour-long PBS documentary, *Shoah Ambassadors*, produced by Famie through his Visionalist Entertainment Productions company, as well as by Warren Rose, Marjory Epstein and the Marvin and Betty Danto Family Foundation. Famie is aiming for the special to air in winter.

COVID-19 Adaptations

Originally, Famie had hoped to film in Poland, planning to pair two young ambassadors with two Holocaust survivors. Together, they would tour major sites of the Holocaust such as Auschwitz and Majdanek concentration camps and the Warsaw Ghetto. Then the pandemic hit.

After months of work, Famie says he felt the project was too important to let go. He decided to switch the focus of the film to a local site of remembrance: the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills.

Famie then searched for two local young people who had limited knowledge about the Holocaust and artistic talents they could use to articulate what they learned about the genocide.

After an in-depth search using Facebook, local schools and colleges, Famie found Curtis Bates, a 19-year-old rapper, singer and songwriter from Detroit, and Hailey Callahan, a 22-year-old artist and sculptor from Rochester. Famie feels that Bates and Callahan's educational experiences and passions will provide the potential for a new kind of Holocaust narrative.

"This film is not for the 60-, 70- and 80-year olds," he said. "It's for the 16-, 19-, 22-year olds. So, it's important that it's their narratives, their thoughts and their creativity."

Filming at the Memorial Center

On July 6, Bates and Callahan came to the Holocaust Memorial Center for the first day of *Shoah Ambassadors* filming. Though they both grew up within 40 minutes of the center, neither had visited before.

Throughout the first day, Famie and his production crew followed Bates and Callahan on a guided visit of the center as they viewed exhibits on the history of antisemitism, Kristallnacht and the rise of Adolf Hitler. Howard Lupovitch, an associate professor of history at Wayne State University and the director of the school's Cohn-Haddow Center for Judaic Studies, provided historical background and context before each display. Lupovitch says that in a country where [two-thirds of millennials](#) don't know what Auschwitz is, educating young people about the Holocaust is crucial. "It's so important to know about, both to understand the past and to have better perspective on these sorts of events in the present," he said.



Rene Lichtman
Keith Famie



Irene Miller

Bates explained that his Holocaust education in school was at times confusing and focused more on sequences of events. He says that the HMC was the perfect place to start to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Holocaust. "It feels like such a step up from a museum," he said. "It's really a great learning tool for people who don't know much about the Holocaust to leave knowing so much more."

In addition to a learning experience, Bates says the filmed tour of the center was an emotional one. He was particularly struck by footage of soldiers liberating concentration camps with bodies piled on top of each other. "Those were images that I saw that stuck with me," he said. And while the guided visit of the HMC had an emotional impact on the young ambassadors, on Friday July 10, Bates and Callahan embarked on an even more poignant journey as a part of the second day of filming: interviewing Holocaust survivors. Throughout the day, Bates and Callahan took turns asking questions of Holocaust survivors Rene Lichtman, Irene Miller, Edith Manaker, Fred Lessing and Mania Salinger.

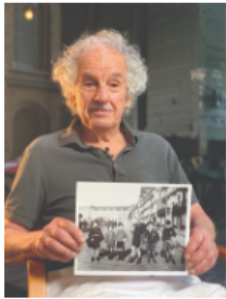


Edith Manaker

Famie says that the safety of survivors during filming in the wake of COVID-19 was paramount. Through a series of meetings, Famie and directors and staff at the Holocaust Memorial Center worked to understand and

incorporate safety protocols. As a part of these procedures, survivors came in one at a time for interviews, stayed 6 feet apart from others during filming and wore masks when filming ceased.

Bates and Callahan say they feel privileged to have the opportunity to learn from survivors. Having never spoken to one before, Callahan says she wanted to know more about how the experience affects them to this day. Throughout interviews, Bates and Callahan asked survivors a range of questions, including what their experience in death camps was like and who they lost in the genocide.



Fred Lessing

During a particularly emotional moment of his interview, Lessing, a psychologist and survivor from the Netherlands who went into hiding at the age of 6, described looking at an image of another 6-year-old boy in the Holocaust later in life and weeping uncontrollably. Lessing said the boy looked lost. “And I realized that I was crying for my 6-year-old self,” he told Callahan during the interview.

Callahan says this story from Lessing will stay with her. She says she was extraordinarily touched by Lessing’s and other survivors’ willingness to be open with her and Bates about the terrible things that happened to them.

“It’s their history, their life,” she said. “It’s real. It happened. We need to know. We need to respect them and what they went through.”

Lessing says that when it comes to the tragedy, sometimes people don’t want to remember. But he feels that this dialogue is one of the most important ways to educate and prevent future atrocities. “I sometimes tell people if you want to learn about the Holocaust, don’t just read history books,” said Lessing. “Listen to what people who were there have to say. If you don’t remember it, it will come back.”



Mania Salinger

Lessing’s words struck Bates as well. He says he will always remember Lessing’s advice for younger generations: Question authority.

Future Production and Artistic Expression

Famie says there is much work left to be done for the documentary, including several months of production. For the next part of the project, he is eager to begin filming the daily lives of Bates and Callahan, and show how they will use their artistic talents to express the stories and information they have learned from the HMC and survivors.

Callahan says she plans on sitting with the survivors’ stories for a little while before she begins an art installation. She is considering creating a sculpture in her community using barbed wire.

“I’m going to be inspired by their stories to create something that will hopefully do justice for the community,” she said. Bates plans on creating a song to relay the narratives he heard. He hopes to call it “Stolen Dreams,” inspired by a question he asked survivors about the childhoods that were taken away from them. “I want to keep it true to my sound while merging it with my experience learning about the Holocaust and talking to the survivors,” he said.



Photo courtesy of Keith Famie

For Lichtman, an 82-year-old Holocaust survivor and artist, educational opportunities about the Holocaust can take many forms. He says that as a survivor, he takes every chance he can to tell his story to the younger generation, which he feels has the most power to make a difference. “The young people, they’re the only hope we have,” Lichtman said.

Famie feels grateful to have been able to include so many survivors’ experiences and to have completed the filming of the interviews as soon as possible during an unpredictable time. Eventually, he hopes *Shoah Ambassadors* will be used as educational material throughout high schools, so that future generations will take an active role in sharing the legacies and lived experiences of the true ambassadors: Holocaust survivors.

“Who’s going to carry the torch?” he said. “Who’s going to carry that really emotional understanding of the depth of what went on and the dreams that were stolen from so many children if our young people don’t help tell the story?”

TAGS Curtis Bates Edith Manaker Edith Maniker Fred Lessing Hailey Callahan Holocaust Memorial Center
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