

# Young Eyes Contemplate the Holocaust in New Documentary from Metro Detroit Filmmaker

By Danny Schwartz - 06/17/2021 8:00 AM



*(Courtesy of Keith Famie)*

Since last July, Keith Famie and his team have been in production on a PBS documentary film about the Holocaust, starring the younger generation and directed toward the younger generation.

Last September, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany conducted a nationwide survey on Holocaust knowledge of American millennials (born 1980-1995) and Generation Z (born afterward). The results showed a “worrying lack of basic Holocaust knowledge,” including over 1 in 10 respondents who did not recall ever having heard the word “Holocaust” before.

Some 63% of those surveyed did not know that 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, and over half of those thought the death toll

was 2 million or fewer.

Another troubling revelation was the 49% surveyed that have seen Holocaust denial or distortion posts on social media or elsewhere online.

A consistent bright spot across all the survey findings, though, is the desire for Holocaust education: 64% of all U.S. Millennials and Gen Z believe that Holocaust education should be compulsory in school. Additionally, 80% of all respondents believe it is important to continue teaching about the Holocaust so that it does not happen again.

A documentary filmmaker in Metro Detroit, Keith Famie, is taking inspiring action to boost that Holocaust education. Since last July, Famie and his Visionalist Entertainment Productions team have been in production on a PBS documentary film about the Holocaust, starring the younger generation and directed toward the younger generation.



*Documentary director Keith Famie engineers the filming of the unveiling of Hailey Callahan's train car artwork at the Holocaust Memorial Center.*

*Courtesy of Keith Famie*

Just weeks before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in the United States, Keith Famie attended a speech by Holocaust survivor Edith Maniker at the Holocaust Memorial Center (HMC) in Farmington Hills. Maniker was giving the speech to high school students.

Listening to Maniker's speech, Famie wondered to himself if the speech really stuck with the students.

"It wasn't the messenger, she was powerful and the story was important," Famie said. "But she's 80-something, and they're 17, 19 years old. Did they really get it? I thought there's got to be a better way, or a new way, of telling the Holocaust story that's going to engage a younger generation, a non-Jewish younger generation."

The wheels were then set in motion. Famie devised an idea — finding peers of the younger generation to tell the Holocaust story, with those peers needing to come into the project green with very little knowledge of the Holocaust, and not to be Jewish. Another component important to Famie was that the peers would have a talent of some sort, one they could use to inspire others to tell the story in some way.

"I wanted to find the right individuals that I felt had the sensitivity and empathy about them already," Famie said.

Famie spent a month-and-a-half interviewing individuals, before finding his two Shoah Ambassadors: Hailey Callahan of Rochester, a then 22-year-old artist/sculpturist and graduate from Detroit-based College of Creative Studies (CCS), and Curtis Bates, a singer-songwriter from Detroit.





*Violinist Nathan Bieber plays his instrument during the filming of the Holocaust memorial film for PBS.*

*Courtesy of Keith Famie*

Callahan's artistic medium inspired her to recreate a train car out of stained glass to tell the story of how the trains were used to transport Jews to German death camps.

Bates' musical medium inspired him to write two rap songs in the film which will help illustrate general themes of the Holocaust and, at the same time, generate interest with the younger generation.

### **Filming Begins**

Famie began filming by stepping into Callahan and Bates' life, creating a backstory of who they are and what they do. Filming was done with Bates in a studio and in the streets of Detroit singing, and filming was done with Callahan at CCS, doing some creative sculpture.

An opportunity was also set up for Callahan and Bates to interview the five Holocaust survivors who were chosen with help from the HMC: Maniker, Irene Miller, Mania Salinger, Fred Lessing and Rene Lichtman.

More filming was completed with Callahan as she started down the path of what she wanted to create, and with Bates as he started to work on his songs.

Another couple of days were spent filming at the HMC with Professor Howard Lupovitch from Wayne State University, who specializes in Judaic history, along with an extensive tour of the museum with Callahan and Bates talking about and asking questions about the Holocaust.

Filming was also done with Callahan and Bates visiting the homes of the Holocaust survivors.



*Zosia Gross, 9, recites the English version of the Jewish prayer "Eil Malei Rachamim" while her father, Hazan Daniel Gross, sings in Hebrew with Cantors Neil Michaels and Pamela Schiffer, and Cantorial Soloists Kelly Onickel and Stephanie Michaels.*

*Courtesy of Keith Famie*

Filming for the unveiling of Callahan's train car took place at the HMC on May 20. Famie invited local cantors to sing hymns and prayers during the unveiling, along with a violinist, to make it even more special.

“Hailey chose to make that,” Famie said. “I said to Hailey, ‘You get inspired and let’s just see where this takes us,’ and that’s what she came up with. I don’t think there’s ever been anything like that created in history, and it’s just very powerful.”

Famie recognizes the filming of the scene as the closing of Callahan’s experience, and the handing off of her experience to her generation.

All of this filming took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected and transformed the execution of the filming in many ways.

“It was a curse and a blessing, all in one,” Famie said. “We had planned to film at Auschwitz, and we were supposed to travel to Poland, and all of that stuff went in the can. The whole project, pretty much, was going to go in the can, but I just refused to let it go.”

Famie believes a silver lining created from COVID was that it forced him to think creatively of different ways to tell the story.

“Albert Einstein said, ‘In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.’ I think it forced me to really think through stuff,” Famie said.

### **Yad Vashem Emax**

One of those different ways to tell the story will see the ambassadors touring Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, in a live virtual experience.

On June 23, from the Super Emax theatre at the Emagine Theatre in Novi, Callahan and Bates will be given the virtual tour to gain a deeper understanding of the atrocities of the Holocaust. The live event will have production crews filming on both ends, with the footage to be used to build a story about Yad Vashem in the film.





*Director Keith Famie and artist Hailey Callahan, 23, with her train car proudly in hand, pose together at the end of a night of filming.*

*Courtesy of Keith Famie*

Local Michigan high school groups of students will be present for the session, where they will also become part of the documentary. A Zoom link will be offered to schools statewide so other high school students can join in to watch as part of their history programs.



Famie says the film is in its final phase, with the Yad Vashem filming, filming of one of Bates' songs and a few sit-down interviews with Callahan and Bates left. Famie and his crew will then start laying out the film, with possible catch-up filming to complete. The goal is to have the film ready for November, with the airing date on Detroit Public Television (PBS) to be determined, with additional plans for it to be released internationally.

From his time working with the survivors on the film, Famie believes the film concept and filming execution has resonated with them.

"I think they find it refreshing that we're doing something in a unique way, about a subject that's been told over and over again," Famie said. "I think they look at it feeling hopeful, that maybe we're doing something that's going to reach an audience that would not normally be reached or care about it."

Realizing that Holocaust survivors who are still alive are getting up in age, Famie's biggest goals with the film are sharing their experiences with the younger generation and Holocaust education. The other main goal is wanting the younger generation to know the value of their voices.

"I want them to understand just how powerful and how important their voice is, and how important their future leadership is in any capacity, and to never take it for granted," Famie said. "It's this younger generation that really has the impact to change how we treat each other, how we learn compassion and empathy and understanding of one another's cultures and beliefs."

### **First Reactions**

When Famie needed an artist and asked Callahan if she would be interested in making a piece for the documentary, Callahan jumped at the opportunity.

"It's been interesting for sure because I've never done anything like this," Callahan said. "It was definitely interesting meeting the survivors, I was

speechless. Learning their stories, going through the museum and walking through seeing everything, it was really heavy.”

When Callahan first visited the HMC, the first thing she saw was the life-size train car in the lobby, which inspired her to make the piece.



*Singer-songwriter Curtis Bates, 20, visiting the home of Holocaust survivor Rene Lichtman, learning valuable lessons and discussing the theme of "Never Again."*

*Courtesy of Keith Famie*

“The glass butterflies [on the train I created] are symbolic to the lives that were lost but also symbolic of resilience through change,” Callahan said. “They all go through this awful transition after the Holocaust and they somehow wake up every morning, smile and continue on with their life. The resilience and strength they have is really what inspired my piece.”

Callahan said it took at least 100 hours, and possibly upwards of 150 hours to make the train car.

“I hope the younger generation will see my piece, be curious, ask questions, do their own research and have an interest to learn what happened,” Callahan said. “I hope the documentary as a whole will make

some impact because we need to know and remember what happened, honor the lives lost and make sure it doesn't happen again.”

Callahan took part in the filming at survivor Fred Lessing's home, which ended up as a short film called *Bear and Fred* that Famie decided to enter into several national film festivals to see what would happen.



Courtesy of Keith Famie



To date, the short film is a recent selection to be featured in the Big Apple Film Festival, a finalist in the Independent Shorts Awards (Los Angeles) and won Best Documentary Short in the Los Angeles Movie Awards.

The short film tells the story of a teddy bear that accompanied Lessing in his wanderings from one hiding place to another during World War II, and became a symbol after being loaned to Yad Vashem in 1996 as part of an exhibition called “No Child’s Play.” The story is also the subject of a children’s book released in May 2020, titled “*Bear and Fred: A World War II Story.*”

Lessing’s hopes for the film as a whole align with Famie’s hopes.

### **New Generation**

“I would hope [Famie’s] goal is to address and give this information from Holocaust survivors to a new generation,” Lessing said.

“The actual survivors like myself are getting very old and most of them are dying off.

“I don’t know how it will be for the young generation, but since they’re listening to new generation people asking the questions and getting the answers, maybe it will work. I hope it will speak to them.”

While seeing antisemitism on the rise across the board, Lessing would like Holocaust education to continue gaining steam.

“We need to understand what happened in the past in order to go into the future,” Lessing said. “What’s encouraging is that racism in this country is finally being talked about and argued about. It’s not just hidden as it has been. If you don’t understand and know what happened in the past, it’s going to happen again.”

Singer-songwriter Curtis Bates has written two songs for the film, one about what he learned from the HMC tour called “Stolen Dreams,” and one concept song that came about from a conversation with one of the survivors involved in the film, Rene Lichtman, called “Never Again.”

Bates' role in the film bridges a mutual understanding of the adversities experienced as an American Black male with the marginalized survivors, where both experienced and continue to experience racial and religious discrimination.

"I do see similarities in the adversities we face and they face," Bates said. "Being discriminated against due to things that should be basic human rights like race and religion, they're definitely similar."

Bates said he learned a lot from spending time with Lichtman, with the one thing that stuck out to him most being to "always question and challenge authority."

Lichtman was immediately attracted to participating in the film as it went right along with his interests, having an artistic and documentary filmmaking background.

For the film, Lichtman completed a painting centered around the theme of "Never Again," and urged Bates to create a song around that concept as well.

"This theme of 'Never Again' is really significant in the Jewish community, but as far as I'm concerned, it's a universal statement," Lichtman said. "I said to Curtis, maybe you could do a song on that theme because it certainly can apply to the history of Black people in this country, the history of slavery, oppression, Jim Crow or even what we're experiencing today with police killings."

Lichtman hopes that as artists in their respective ways, Bates and Callahan and the film as a whole can truly do something in terms of passing on the lessons of the Holocaust.

"It's this younger generation that has to figure out how to apply the lessons from the Holocaust, of discrimination, tolerance, empathy and all these values that become empty if they're not actually applied," Lichtman said.

“I hope young people think about how to put these lessons into practice in their own worlds and communities. It’s not just abstract language with a nice ending about how we should love each other, to me that means very little unless you do something.”

Members of the community have generously stepped up to help finance the project. Famie is still looking for financial support for the film. Any individual that wants to be featured as a supporter can contact Famie at [famie@famie.com](mailto:famie@famie.com).

To learn more about Shoah Ambassadors, visit the website [shoahambassadors.com](http://shoahambassadors.com).

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