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Genocide Awareness Week to unearth human tragedies



Dr. Shereen Lerner, Mesa Community College Cultural Science Department chair, will discuss Sonja's Legacy art exhibit during Genocide Awareness Week at Scottsdale Community College. (Independent Newsmedia/Terrance Thornton)

By Brett Nachman
Independent Newsmedia

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Genocide is not dead.

That message will pervade through each presentation and exhibit at [Scottsdale Community College's](#) inaugural Genocide Awareness Week, which begins April 8.

John Liffiton, the campus' Honors Program co-coordinator; and Kim Klett, English teacher at Dobson High School and a regional educator for the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#), joined forces to develop this historic event.

The college will bring in speakers, whose knowledge and experiences involving genocide in Rwanda, Bosnia, Armenia and other nations, hope to educate the public on unrelenting slaughter.

"In the last century ... there hasn't been one single day where there has not been mass murder going on in the world," Mr. Liffiton said.

Each weekday will feature speeches at 10 a.m., 1 p.m. and 7 p.m., almost all in the college's Turquoise Room, with the exception being the opening night presentation in the Performing Arts Center.

"Never has there been anything (in Arizona) this extensive and we're getting a very big reception," Mr. Liffiton said.

Exhibitions detailing various aspects of genocide will complement the presentations.

The [One Million Bones Project](#) is where "students will actually take plaster and they will form human bones," Mr. Liffiton said.

Eventually these bones will be collected from all over the nation and exhibited on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Artist Robert Sutz's tribute to Holocaust survivors will encompass the lobby of the campus' Fine Arts building, with Mr. Sutz describing his work on 10 a.m. April 8 at the exhibit.

Mr. Sutz's father's family died in Nazi concentration camps.

Many Genocide Awareness Week presenters are closely linked to the content.

Dr. Esad Boskailo, psychiatrist and an associate professor at [University of Arizona](#), will speak about how he survived six Bosnian concentration camps in one year.

"When you are tortured and when you are detained in a camp, the purpose of it is to take all my control away or my power away from me," Dr. Boskailo said. "I am getting it back, and I feel like a winner."

During his camp experiences, Dr. Boskailo was typically detained alongside other professionals, including doctors, teachers and businessmen.

The United Nations facilitated the release of Dr. Boskailo and others he knew in April 1994.

Dr. Boskailo reunited with his family and moved to the United States, becoming a counselor at a Chicago refugee mental health clinic.

Dr. Boskailo encapsulated his trials in “Wounded I Am More Awake,” which he co-authored with Julia Lieblich.

He will be signing copies of the book after discussing the “social, philosophical and psychological aspects of trauma and genocide.”

“I had purpose and meaning in my life, and I believe I recovered quickly,” Dr. Boskailo said.

But not all recuperate fast from experiencing horrendous conditions -- sometimes it can take years, even decades, to open up about suffering.

Dr. Shereen Lerner, [Mesa Community College](#) Honors co-coordinator and anthropology faculty member, chairs the college’s cultural science department.

Dr. Lerner said her father Maximilian did not discuss his experiences in escaping Austria during World War II until 10 to 15 years ago.

“I think that as they get older they recognize the stories need to be told, because if not, they’ll be lost,” Dr. Lerner said.

Both Shereen and Maximilian will talk to the public on different personal connections to this topic.

At 10 a.m. April 10 in the Turquoise Room, Shereen will share the story of Sonja, her mother’s first cousin, who documented the emotion of her concentration camp experiences.

Sonja was killed in Auschwitz at age 13, but her heritage lives on in the form of her recently discovered artwork, which will be showcased at the “Sonja’s Legacy” exhibit on campus during the week.

The girl used pieces of cardboard and paper to draw her homeland and ordeals.

Maximilian plans on discussing escaping from Austria with his family in 1938, each carrying one suitcase.

He later became a United States citizen and then an American agent, Shereen said.

Maximilian’s presentation will take place on April 11 at 10 a.m. in the Turquoise Room.

The weeklong series of events culminates with a series of educator workshops on April 13.

Ms. Klett will lead these sessions, aimed at informing teachers on how to develop lesson plans and curriculums that incorporate topics such as the Holocaust.

“I talk to so many teachers who are in smaller towns or rural areas, and they don’t always have access to even a Holocaust survivor ... and, I think it’s really important for people to see this and to expose their students to this,” Ms. Klett said.

Educators will be provided with resources and materials that detail how to create courses on these issues.

Genocide “isn’t something that we just look back at and shake our heads and say, ‘oh, I’m glad that’s over,’” Ms. Klett said. “It’s still happening.”

For more information on the college’s Genocide Awareness Week, go [here](#)

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