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NEWS from ITA

L.A. Woman

May 15, 2008

Tolerance Museum director doesn't tolerate status quo

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By Elyse Glickman
The Museum of Tolerance is rarely the same experience twice, even with its permanent exhibits. New visuals, soundtracks and materials are added to keep the displays current and relevant. And while many people think of the museum as a "Jewish" institution, it is the "human" experience that touches upon issues that affect visitors of all ages and ethnic backgrounds.



Liebe Geft tours Museum of Tolerance with Lord Carey of Clifton, Archbishop of Canterbury emeritus, and other religious leaders after conference at the Museum this month. Photo: Bart Batholomew. Courtesy Simon Wiesenthal Center

While incorporating technology and an interactive environment into the museum experience was the vision of Simon Wiesenthal Center founder and dean Rabbi Marvin Hier, the constant editing and improving of collections and programs reflect the mind of Liebe Geft, a former broadcast journalist. Ten years after she assumed the role of executive director at the Pico-Robertson-adjacent Museum of Tolerance, she exhibits the same passion for and commitment to presenting current events as she did when she was on the air.

Geft has not only maintained this well-oiled machine, but kept its chief products -- an impact-making, interactive museum and broad-based community programs -- in consistent supply, navigating the flow of societal and economic changes.

"Right now, you can say that everything is new at the museum," she said.

Since it opened in 1993, the Museum of Tolerance's efforts to "confront the dynamic of intolerance that is still embedded in society today" has attracted more than 300,000 people each year; one-third of the visitors are school-age children.

Permanent exhibitions include the Tolerancenter, which encourages visitors to consider intolerance in daily life; the Holocaust exhibit, a tour that recounts the events leading up, during and after the Shoah; and Finding Our Families, Finding Ourselves, a collection of personal histories from notable Americans, including Maya Angelou, Billy Crystal and Carlos Santana.

For the Tolerancenter's exhibit called the Point of View Diner, Geft is currently working on a way to deal with the national epidemic of bullying, an important issue that affects many children. She's also revising a script on terrorism for the museum's Millennium Machine, the second post-Sept. 11 revision, which will look at dangers we face from nontraditional forms of potential terrorist attacks.

"Everything that goes into this museum is meant to be a trigger for discussion and debate ... a stimulus to raise awareness about the issues that are difficult but need to be confronted collectively and individually. Although many of the exhibits are permanent, we now have a commitment and an obligation to make sure all exhibits are relevant and current. If they aren't, they are not going to be

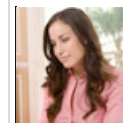
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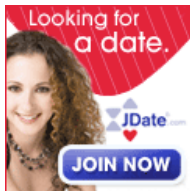
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meaningful," she said.

Even the well-received and established Holocaust exhibit is constantly updated so visitors can personalize history and make it relevant to their lives today. It's also being altered to make way for a new Youth Action Lab.

New sections were recently opened in the Tolerancenter, with the largest project, the History Walk, offering a different perspective on the history of the United States, from the 1600s to the present, reflecting on issues of diversity, intolerance and moving toward a just society.

What all the exhibits have in common, according to Geft, is that they are designed to actively engage people and amplify their own voices, down to polling stations and exploration displays.

"I feel like my coming here was quite fortuitous, and I credit Rabbi Meyer May, who extended the opportunity to me," said Geft, recalling the museum's former executive director. "The biggest attraction about the position, however, was the potential and enormity of the challenge. It represented an opportunity to create a program that was highly innovative in many respects and had the promise of really making a difference, especially as we are promoting human dignity and mutual respect for one another in our society. It is a very noble mission, and something I could not resist."

Geft grew up in Zimbabwe, in a Jewish family rich in humanistic values, where tolerance and respect for other humans was a day-to-day reality rather than a series of do's and don'ts, and speaking up on issues that mattered was encouraged constantly. Exposing herself to different cultures and viewpoints strengthened the values that tie in with her upbringing and her late father's credo, "If man is pleased with man, God is pleased with man."

Her natural curiosity about the world took her to England and Israel for university study and work, and from there into careers in broadcast journalism and education.

What Geft embraced most about her earlier work was her ongoing ability to take what she learned on the job and pass it on to her audiences. Her time at the Financial News Network (which later became CNBC) stands as a pivotal career experience, especially with the innovative ways news was researched, reported and relayed to viewers worldwide.

In 1996, she brought her skills and experience to the Museum of Tolerance as director of the Tools for Tolerance for Professionals program, developing curricular materials like the "Teacher's Guide for the Museum of Tolerance" and workshops for hundreds of thousands of teachers, law enforcement officials, and municipal employees.

By 1998 she had assumed the responsibilities as the museum's director. From the beginning, she dedicated up to 80 hours a week building the museum's outreach and educational programs, adding new interactive exhibitions and landmark exhibitions that kept it current and relevant.

"It is very gratifying to go to work every day when the focus of your job is to make the world a better place, through the hearts and minds of everyone we interact with," she said.

Geft is proud of the fact that she is leading people of all ages and walks of life down a path of enlightenment, from schoolchildren to professional adults. But her path to and around Los Angeles in itself has been a journey of discovery. While her dream -- and that of her husband -- is to live in Israel, Los Angeles and the Museum of Tolerance have proven themselves to be part of a rich detour that has reinforced the values Geft has known since childhood. Or as she puts it, "Life has a strange way of thwarting best-laid plans."

"Los Angeles has an amazing Jewish community, of which we are very proud to be a part," Geft said, noting she has raised five sons here.

According to Geft, the city is an ideal locale for the Museum of Tolerance since it represents a "veritable microcosm of a macrocosmic global world," where residents trace their roots to 140 different nationalities and the city is home to the largest Armenian, Korean, Filipino, Salvadoran and Guatemalan populations outside their respective capital cities.

"This city is a true social laboratory, and it's a perfect fit for an institution designed to be on the cutting edge of social change," she said. "I recall when there was a scare of poisonous strawberries in the Los Angeles Unified School District, letters were sent home to parents in more than 100 different languages. There is no better place to be when you're looking to build bridges of mutual understanding and cooperation between different groups."

Los Angeles is also a great home for the museum, not surprisingly, because of its proximity to major players in the entertainment industry at both the celebrity and corporate levels. Although Geft is adamant in pointing out that every visitor to the museum and participant in its social programs are VIPs, she observes her institution gets a major boost through the support of public figures.

"There are many important [Hollywood] players closely associated with Simon Wiesenthal Center, especially because our work is congruent with their causes and the charities that they embrace," she said. "They have the power to influence, and we are fortunate to have many of them coming to the museum."

Prior to a Museum of Tolerance preview of the 2007 film, "A Mighty Heart," an adaptation of Mariane Pearl's memoir on the search for her husband, kidnapped Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, star Angelina Jolie toured the museum and watched a short documentary titled, "In Our Time," which covered terrorism and Pearl's death.

"After that, she recalled that her first visit to the museum in middle school made a profound impression on her," Geft said of Jolie.

In the Hilary Swank film, "Freedom Writers," teacher Erin Gruwell takes her students to the museum to get them thinking about tolerance.

"When celebrities make these kinds of statements, direct or otherwise, it really piques the interest of

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people," she said.

According to Geft, the principles the museum was built on will continue to be reflected in upcoming visiting exhibitions, which will cover such diverse topics as the Jews of modern China, Mexican diplomat Gilberto Bosques' efforts to rescue Jews from Vichy France during World War II and the struggle toward desegregation and equity in schools -- from Brown v. The Board of Education to the present.

Not surprisingly, bringing these exhibits to light will involve many hours and a lot of patience. Thankfully, Geft notes the support of her family enables her to do good and do well. And she says her patience and support pays off with every person impacted by the thought put into the permanent and temporary exhibits and the messages they convey.

"My professional life is not, 'I used to do this, but now I do that,'" she said. "It is a continuation of everything I have done my whole life, exploring new frontiers and finding new challenges to take on."

For more information on upcoming exhibitions and the museum, visit www.museumoftolerance.com.

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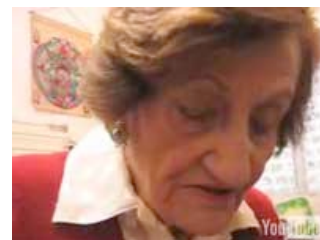
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