

November 18, 2014 – Lee Students Visit United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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On Tuesday, November 11, students from Robert E. Lee High School experienced a very special Veterans Day that included a tour of a sobering museum and ended with an electrifying celebration of our nation's veterans. Over 30 students who are enrolled in the Holocaust and Genocide Studies elective taught by social studies teacher, Jennifer L. Goss, took part in a day-long trip to our nation's capital with the primary purpose of visiting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Goss, who is a member of the Museum's Regional Education Corps (REC), and Mrs. Lori Swortzel, Lee High's Assistant Principal, were assisted by numerous parents and guardians of the students to facilitate the trip aboard a charter bus.

Upon arriving in D.C., students were dropped off at the Navy Memorial which is located at the edge of the zone that had been closed down in anticipation of the evening's Concert for Valor – a first time event that sought to bring attention to the struggles of returning veterans. The imposing presence of the Navy Memorial set the tone for the day and was a powerful sight for the students, many of whom were experiencing a trip to the District for the very first time. The group then traveled to the beautiful Ronald Reagan International Trade Building to take advantage of the building's food court and also to see Washington's extension of the World Trade Center.

Following lunch, the group set off to view the World War II Memorial, which celebrated its tenth anniversary earlier this year. The Memorial honors the sixteen million Americans who took part in this conflict, over 400,000 of whom lost their lives serving during the war. R. E. Lee High School junior, Eddie Burton said, "It was beautiful and so massive – a tribute to our nation's soldiers. It is truly a sight to see."

The venture past this Memorial en route to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum set the tone for the centerpiece of the trip, which also included activities with students from Goss' former high school in Pennsylvania, Fleetwood Area High School. Students from both schools had taken part in a book-sharing project where students read the Holocaust memoir/graphic novel, *Maus* by Art Spiegelmann. This was the first time students met in person and it was a wonderful experience for them to connect the names to the faces of their blogging cohort. Goss' former colleague, Sean Gaston, was excited about the connection and shared, "It was a great experience for the students to hear from different voices regarding a common memoir and wonderful for the students to finally meet in person."

During the four plus hours students were in USHMM, they partook in a self-guided tour of the Permanent Exhibition and the new temporary exhibit, *Some Were Neighbors: Collaboration and Complicity During the Holocaust*. They followed the story of an individual who experienced the events of this era and at the end of their tour, learned the individual's fate. An added bonus for the students was the nearly empty nature of the Museum on the day of their visit. Due to unprecedented crowds projected for the Concert, most individuals curtailed their visits to area museums, a decision that was not lost on Goss. "I've been leading student trips to USHMM for over 10 years," Goss shared. "This is the first time my students have been virtually the only individuals in some parts of the Museum. It really added to the experience and allowed them to better process the difficult material they saw while there."

The group also toured portions of the Museum that portrayed contemporary genocides and human rights issues including a special exhibition that contained newly released photos from the conflict in Syria. Lee High junior, Justin Shaw called the photos as "eye-opening" and said, "It's really disturbing to think that those things are happening right now, while we are standing here." Shaw is now motivated to find out more about this conflict.

The students ended the evening celebrating our nation's veterans and learning about the difficult transition that awaits many veterans upon their return home. During a nearly three hour experience at the Concert for Valor on the National Mall, students heard from star-studded performers such as Carrie Underwood, Metallica, the Zac Brown Band and Bruce Springsteen. The performances were interspersed with videos and appearances by veterans from recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Shaw was really touched by the veteran's stories, particularly the one about a young Marine who overcame difficult circumstances growing up in poverty as the child of a gang leader. "The fact that he moved passed this upbringing and went on to serve our nation is so awesome," added Lee High senior, Javantae Johnson.

The concert provided the perfect end of a day that had students dealing with difficult times in the world's history. It has inspired them to become more aware of our nation's veterans and also to plan an outreach project that will reach out to wounded veterans during the holiday season. Although the students had to leave before the concert's end, they were grateful to have this opportunity on a gorgeous day in November.



Lee students enjoy a very special field trip to Washington, D.C. on Veterans Day.