

WITNESS THEATER

STUDY GUIDE



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Aron is 88 years old, Eazek is 94 and Claudine is 89. Over seventy years ago, although they lost their entire families, they survived the Holocaust and resettled in New York City. Now they are sharing their stories in a unique program led by a drama therapist with high school students in Brooklyn. The hope is that this sharing will sensitize the students and give some closure to the adult survivors after all these years. The Witness Theater workshop they participate in culminates in the performance of a play based on Survivor stories.



The film that has emerged uses a mix of cinema verite, archival footage, interviews, animation and staged recreations of stories to blend past and present, using the Witness Theater program as a vehicle for telling the survivors' remarkable stories. Scenes from the program's weekly creative workshops and final performance are interspersed with scenes of the survivors at home, all within the structure of a dramatic arc that traces survivors' lives before, during and after the war.

The result is a story that, told in the present, imparts insights into the effect of the past on multiple generations of Jews, while also illustrating the power and importance of transmitting experience from one generation to the next.



As the last generation of Holocaust survivors lives out their final years, the number of individuals who are physically and mentally able to “bear witness” dwindles and the question of what happens to their stories and their experience remains.



WITNESS: UNLOCKING THE SILENCE



OBJECTIVES

This study guide, designed to accompany the film **Witness Theater**, will highlight some of the key aspects of the film. The **Witness Theater** program takes place throughout New York City at a range of schools including the two sites where we filmed: the Yeshivah of Flatbush Joel Braverman High School in Brooklyn, NY, and a group convened by the Marlene Meyerson JCC and held at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School in Manhattan with students from the Trinity School as well. **Witness Theater** was filmed in Brooklyn and **Helga's Story**, which will also be referenced in the guide, was filmed in Manhattan. A link to that 14-minute film will be available through **Menemsha Films** if teachers would like to view this clip as well.

Each section of the guide will provide a lesson with essential questions and discussion topics along with some pedagogical strategies intended to enhance the use of the film and raise some universal issues like: transmission of knowledge and experience from one generation to the next; the importance of breaking down barriers in order to reach beyond a limited community; and learning to listen to others who have stories to tell- stories that need to be heard. This is a film about crossing boundaries and developing empathy for those who may be coming from very different backgrounds, generations, and experiences.



This film provides an opportunity to witness the impact an encounter like this can have on both the teller and the listener. Think about those untold stories in your own communities that might provide a learning opportunity for all of us.

The Holocaust happened in the heart of 20th Century Europe, initiated in Germany - a country known as a center of art, music, culture and learning. It was a country with a newly instituted democratic constitution and it took not just its leaders to participate and overturn democracy, but also required the participation or compliance of many ordinary citizens. Many people considered moral barometers in society- lawyers, doctors, judges, and teachers, all contributed to making the systematic isolation of its Jewish members of society and others a reality that led to their exclusion and ultimately their deaths. The lessons we can learn from this history closely relate to the issues of today. Democracy is fragile and we each have a responsibility to preserve and protect it, so in studying this history, we can hopefully watch for warning signs and become active citizens participating in creating a healthy, fair and just society.



INTRODUCTION



At the heart of the Holocaust lie the voices of those who survived the nightmare and the voices of those who did not. In Jewish tradition, the passing of stories from one generation to the next is an important part of maintaining law, culture, memory and connection to the past. Hearing, knowing, and understanding the experiences of the survivors of the Holocaust is an obligation and privilege educators have to those who hold the stories. It is as important for those of us who weren't there to listen and learn as it is for those who lived through the experience to tell and know they are transmitting history to the next generation. These stories, told to us by the witnesses of this watershed event, provide a unique dimension to the history - an ethical and human dimension that historical facts can't provide, especially since much of the original documentation was written by the perpetrators.

The testimony of the witnesses and victims not only turn an abstraction and a number into a person, but they also provide a path to access the magnitude of the Holocaust and give the listener a glimpse into what was lost and the irreversibility of that loss. The impact of hearing a story from a witness, providing a human face, magnifies the event and it becomes impossible to dismiss it as fiction or ancient history. As Lawrence Langer says in his article "Holocaust Testimonies and Their Audience":

They {Survivors of the Holocaust} impose on us not only the role of passive listener, but also of active hearer. This requires us to suspend our sense of the normal and accept the complex immediacy of a voice teaching us simultaneously from the comfortable present and the devastating past. That complexity distinguishes these testimonies from normal discourse as well as from written text, while redefining our role as audience.

We can close a book, we can push information aside, but when we are confronted with a person, we listen and hear differently.

What this film highlights is how students, given the opportunity to learn this history through the added dimension of encounter and relationship, gain a lesson with far greater impact than learning history alone. Because there is still the opportunity to do that through the experience provided to these students by Selfhelp: Witness Theater, it is well worth exploring how this can be replicated in so many ways, in your own communities.

-Jan Darsa

LESSON 1

Sometimes a piece of art, music or a poem can enhance a learning experience. Read the poem/song below. How might it tie in with a project that involves the art of listening and telling. There are many interpretations of this song- it is about alienation, industrialization and loneliness. But when you embark on a journey with people whose stories of a painful and tortuous past have yet to be told, what might be gained from both the teller and the listener by allowing the silence to finally be broken?

The Sound of Silence

*Hello darkness, my old friend
I've come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my
brain*

*Still remains
Within the sound of silence*

*In restless dreams I walked alone
Narrow streets of cobblestone
'Neath the halo of a street lamp
I turned my collar to the cold and damp
When my eyes were stabbed by the flash of
a neon light
That split the night
And touched the sound of silence*

*And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence*

*"Fools," said I, "You do not know
Silence, like a cancer, grows
Hear my words that I might teach you
Take my arms that I might reach you"
But my words, like silent raindrops fell
And echoed in the wells, of silence*

*And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon god they made
And the sign flashed out its warning
In the words that it was forming
And the sign said, "The words of the
prophets are written on the subway walls
And tenement halls"
And whispered in the sounds of silence*

Songwriters: Paul Simon

*The Sound of Silence lyrics © Universal Music Publishing
Group*

Write a reflection on what you think this song means and what connection it might have to the film and project we are about to become witness to.

The opening scene of the film sets the stage for a unique project undertaken in various schools and community centers in New York. It is a learning project, but it is also a healing project. It is clear many of the survivors haven't spoken about their experiences before. It is also clear many of the students haven't heard stories like these before. These two groups are coming together to spend the year involved in a project that will open the door for each to tell and to witness. There are many reasons people who have gone through traumatic experiences don't want to talk about those experiences, and there are also reasons that others have a hard time hearing about trauma that doesn't belong to them.

One student said after hearing her survivor's story,

"The way I think of her is just a quiet courage, because the whole time she's super quiet and reserved, but there's always something that you know is just below the surface trying to get out. And then if you're listening really carefully sometimes you can hear it."

Look at the above song written by Paul Simon and sung by Simon and Garfunkel. What do we learn through one of their most famous songs about silence, listening, alienation, hearing and telling according to the poet/songwriter? How does the student quote amplify one of the messages in the song?

In the early stage of the project, Sally's (the drama therapist) main focus is having the groups of students and survivors get to know each other. She has them participate in some ice-breaker activities and has the survivors talk about their childhood memories before the war. The students also have the opportunity to visit the survivors' homes. They return to the school to share these stories with the whole group.



Essential Questions

Who in your community may have stories to tell that are mostly unknown to us and how might we help gather those stories?

What are some of the reasons people, especially survivors of the Holocaust and other trauma victims, might be reluctant to share their pasts?

How might forming a relationship with someone make it easier for them to tell their stories?

How might this relationship be important to the person telling the story, particularly if the story is one of a difficult or traumatic part of their life?

How might the listener be impacted differently by hearing a story told in person as opposed to reading the account of an unknown person?

Does the listener have an obligation or responsibility to the person sharing their story?

What might these stories have to do with you and your lives?

Think about these questions and as you watch and listen to the opening 17:46 minutes of the film, write down some of your thoughts and answers to the above questions.

Discuss what you heard students say about their concerns about meeting the survivors for the first time.

What were the survivors' concerns?



Quotes of the survivors

Agnes: "I feel that they look at me like I am not 100%."

"They have no idea what happened."

"Even when they hear something, they don't take [it] so seriously."

Eazak: "Whatever happened to us, nobody can understand."

Aron: "I am afraid that the world is getting tired of hearing our stories. They cannot comprehend and I don't blame them."

Quotes of the students

"Meeting them really materialized what their stories are for me. They were always sort of just an idea in my head. They existed but I never knew ... I never thought about the fact that they're real people who exist in other ways other than just victims of the Holocaust."

"It's a really horrible thing to say. They're really old. And like right now, one of my biggest fears is that something is going to happen to them throughout the year and it freaks me out every time I think about it."

"I didn't expect to form the relationship that I did. I am still grappling with the concept that, wow, like they're so incredible, like I love them."

*"It's easier to deny if there are no witnesses."
"Yeah, if there are no witnesses, but that's what we are, that's what the camera is for. We can tell our kids, that's what our job is."*

Activity and Discussion

Have students get into pairs. One will be the student voice and the other will be the survivor voice. Have them talk to each other and discuss the fears each group had through the two voices- of survivor and student.

As a whole group/class, discuss how the “games” the drama therapist played with the students and survivors helped relieve some of the anxiety both groups felt. How did the visit at the home of the survivor further help students get to know the survivors better?

What did you learn from this initial interaction?

What do the survivors’ voices lend to the study of history?

Was there a particular story that resonated with you in the opening of the film?

LESSON 2

Watch section 2 of the film (17:45-34:23)

In this section of the film we learn more about the survivors' experiences and the impact these experiences had and continue to have on them. At the same time, the students are developing a genuine closeness to the survivors and becoming script writers to their stories. Together they visit the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, which proves to be a very powerful experience for both the students and the survivors. The students can appreciate "behind every object in the museum there is a life." There are more visits with the survivors in their homes and we observe students' ability to see their new friends as a whole, not defined only by their traumatic experiences as they bridge the generation gap.

Essential Questions:

A student said, "When I was six years old, I was diagnosed with Neuroblastoma (a brain tumor). I just went through everything that was done to me. So now it sort of feels numb in the same way, I was so little that I didn't understand what was going on. They were young when it happened, and they probably experienced the same sort of trauma and just confusion."

In what ways might these stories relate to each of us, despite the fact that we will never truly know what this experience was like for those who survived it?

What does the section tell us about the significance of intergenerational transmission?

How might hearing someone's story create empathy?

How might hearing stories of survivors and other people's difficult experiences help put your own daily trials and tribulations into perspective?

What are some of the ways we can enter the lives of others in a meaningful and helpful way?

The survivors featured in this project all have very different stories to tell. They span geography, which has definitely informed their experiences. They have lived in Poland, Argentina, Romania, Ukraine, Hungary, France and Czechoslovakia.

Discuss how living in these different places may have influenced their stories.

Activity:

Students could research (either in pairs or individually) each of these places (or another place) to learn how Jews were impacted differently depending on where they were from and how the Germans engaged the different areas in Europe that they invaded. Timing played a crucial role (as did luck), but this is an opportunity for students to do some research and learning about the history of the Jews in different places in Nazi occupied Europe. They can become teachers as they present their findings to the class.

Dates of the Nazis taking control of Europe

Austria was annexed into Germany - **March, 1938.**

Poland was attacked on **September 1, 1939** and was defeated weeks later.

Belgium, France, the Netherlands, the Channel Islands and Romania were all attacked and surrendered in **1940.**

The Soviet Union was an ally of Germany but was attacked in **1941.** The Soviets never surrendered and triumphed in **1944.**

Yugoslavia, Greece, Serbia, and surrendered in **1941.**

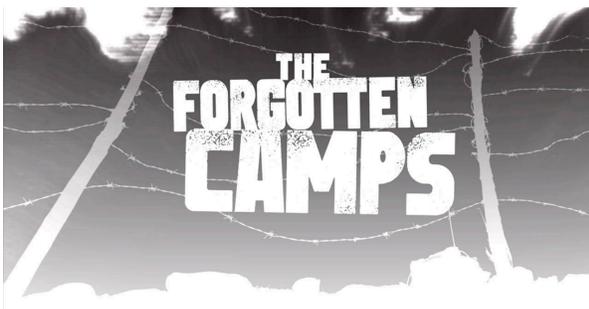
England entered the war in **1939** and the United States entered the war after Pearl Harbor was bombed in **1941.**

Germany surrendered in **1945.**

Ultimately Germany fell in **1944** after the successful beach landing at Normandy, which led to the German defeat. But when the war finally ended in **1945** with the surrender of Germany and Japan, six million Jews had been murdered in mass shootings, mobilized gas vans and death camps and the Jewish communities in Western and Eastern Europe had been almost totally destroyed. An entire culture of 2000 years was erased from European history.

There were many other victims of Nazi persecution, including Communists and political dissidents, the Roma (Gypsy) People, members of the LGBTQ community, and those with physical and developmental disabilities.

To learn more about the camps and the systematic murder of Jews and its impact on its survivors, the short film below will help further students' knowledge on the history:



www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgmfmvNFKuY

These dates shed light on the history. How might the timing have impacted the survivors?

Claudine, the survivor from France, brings up the point that because the students have never gone through anything like this, they simply can't understand what it was like. Do you agree or disagree with this?

Can the gap in experience be bridged in any way?

One of the students (Isaac) says that he was shocked to think these survivors were once normal kids like us. How have you witnessed through their word exchanges what they have gone through that may be directly related to their experiences of over 70-75 years ago?

LESSON 3

In this final section of the film, (49:20-end of film) we see the survivors recalling more moments of their lives and the experience of liberation. We also see how Sally, the drama therapist, has taken the words she has heard during these encounters between the students and survivors over the course of the school year and made them into a dramatic production that includes both the students and the survivors. They perform this for the school community and the public. We learn even more about the survivors' lives.



Discuss:

One student said, after performing the play at the Heschel School, "Hearing stories like Helga's, and like so many of the other survivors, it gives me perspective and it really makes me thankful, grateful beyond words. But I would say that, that feeling of deep gratitude has come more with time and with acting out Helga's story."



How can art serve as a therapeutic experience for both the tellers of the story and the students who served as witnesses?

What other forms of art might be effective in bringing people together and serving as a therapeutic experience for all involved?

What does this added dimension presented in this encounter add to the study of history?

How does performing the play impact the students? The survivors? The audience?

What does it mean to write someone else's script?

How can encounters like these serve both the teller of their story and the witness?

Activity

Give students the biographies of the survivors www.witnesstheaterthefilm.com/participants

CAFÉ CONVERSATIONS

1. RATIONALE

Students need an awareness of different perspectives in order to understand past events. The Café Conversation strategy helps students practice perspective-taking by requiring them to represent a particular point of view in a small-group discussion. By engaging in a conversation with people who represent other backgrounds and experiences, students become more aware of the role that many factors (e.g., social class, occupation, gender, age) play in shaping one's attitudes and perspectives on historical events. Use the Café Conversations activity as an assessment tool or to prepare students to write an essay about a specific historical event.

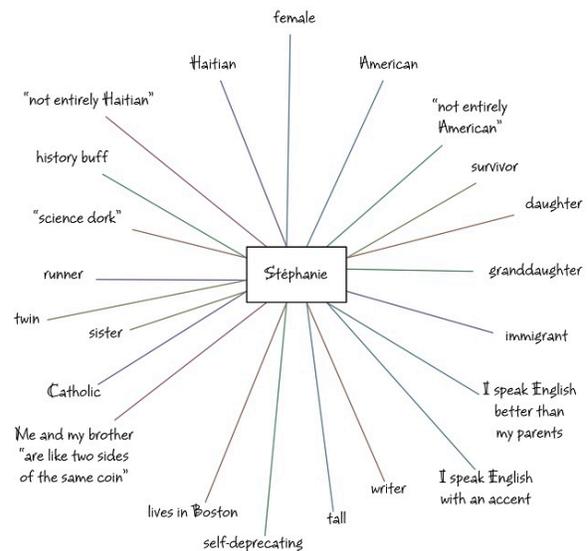
2. PROCEDURE

Prepare Personalities and Topic for Conversation

Each student selects one of the survivors from the film. For each personality, prepare a short biography that includes anything you learned about this person, information such as gender, age, family status (married, single, how many children, etc.), occupation, education level, and significant life events. Next, you will need to select an issue or event relevant to the students' lives. Maybe an upcoming election or a contemporary political event.

Students Prepare for Conversation

Assign each student a particular personality to represent. Give students the relevant background information and/or biography to read. After they read this background information, you might have students create an identity chart (www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/identity-charts) for their character. Then ask students to hypothesize how this person would feel about the matter at hand—the event or question they will be discussing during the Café Conversation.



The Café Conversation

During the Café Conversation, students represent their assigned personality in a discussion about the assigned topic. The conversation should begin with students introducing themselves. Then one member announces the conversation starter (often a question or statement prepared in advance). It can be as simple as, “So I heard that ___ is happening. What do you think about this?” Conversations typically last at least 20 minutes, but they can run much longer. Before beginning these conversations, it is important to go over norms about how to disagree respectfully and stay on topic. Here are two main ways you can structure Café Conversations:

Make a circle of chairs in the center of the room. The number of chairs should represent the number of assigned personalities. Invite 4-5 students to join the conversation. The rest of the class watches the conversation. At certain moments, you can announce “Switch,” meaning that a student in the “fishbowl” is replaced by another student. Or you can allow students to “tap” a group member on the shoulder when they want a turn to speak.

Debrief

Give students the opportunity to debrief this activity. You could facilitate a class discussion, starting with a general question such as, “What did you learn from this activity?”

How did it feel for you to participate in the Café Conversation? During what part of the conversation did you feel most comfortable? Least comfortable? Why do you think that is?

What did you learn about this moment in history from participating in this activity?

What did you learn about yourself or about human behavior from participating in this activity?

LESSON 4

Where do we go from here?

One of the drama therapists involved in the project said, "The alchemy of the teenagers and the adults coming together, there's something about these generations coming together, that really is the secret ingredient. It's not me, it's not drama therapy, it's not anything else in the program, it is that bridge between these generations."

In thinking about encounter and relationship building as an avenue for learning and healing and crossing the boundary of the generations, have students go back to some of their original thoughts about people in their own communities who are experiencing or may have experienced some sort of trauma in their lives. It might be something like being a refugee or dealing with hardships that involve homelessness, hunger, loss or other such events that can create a feeling of isolation and fear.

How might a project like this be replicated in their community? What kind of project could students and the school organize where they might reach out to help?

Who are the communities that might benefit from an encounter like this with young people?

How might young people learn and grow through an experience like this?

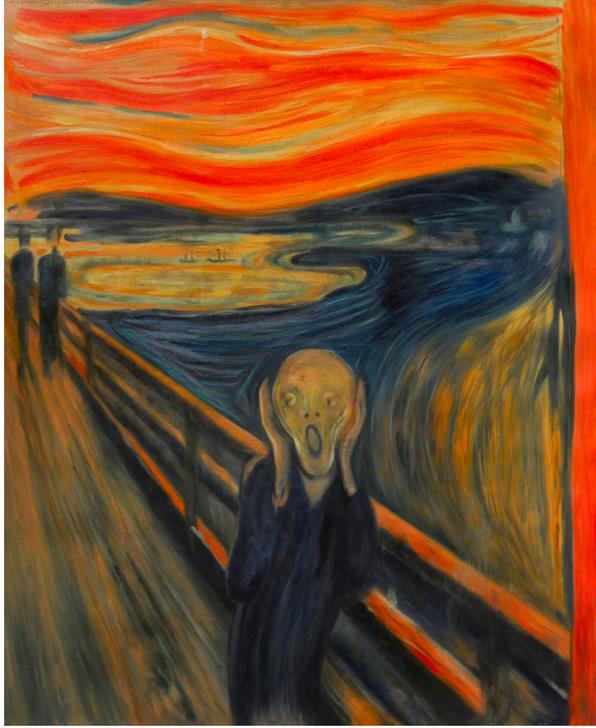
Have the students brainstorm ideas of what they might do, how they could develop the concept and a work plan which ultimately could lead to the implementation of their ideas. How could art be a part of the project? (Music, testimony, creating works of art-sculpture, painting, poetry.)

For example - students could interview a parent, a grandparent, someone they know through their parents or at their synagogue or church or community center, someone from a very different background perhaps.

Go back to **Lesson 1** and re-read "*The Sounds of Silence*."

After viewing this film and hearing these voices, many who have been silent all these years about their experiences, how do you read these words differently?

Now view the painting "*The Scream*" by **Edvard Munch** (page 17). After projecting the image (teachers could also make copies for each student) ask student to analyze the image.



Courtesy of Facing History and Ourselves website

Activity: Analyzing Images

RATIONALE

Use this strategy to guide students through a close analysis of "The Scream". By following the steps in this image-analysis procedure, students develop awareness of historical context, develop critical thinking skills, enhance their observation and interpretive skills, and develop conceptual learning techniques. You can use this strategy with any visual media, including a piece of art, photograph, political cartoon, propaganda poster, or video clip.

PROCEDURE

Lead Students through Analysis

Share the image with students by providing copies or by projecting or displaying it in the classroom. Lead students slowly through the following six steps, pausing between each step to give them significant time for thinking and writing.

Step One, Ask students to look deeply at the picture for a good long time. Have them observe shapes, colors, textures, the position of people and/or objects, etc.

Step Two, Have students write down what they see without making any interpretation about what the picture is trying to say.

Step Three, Ask students: What questions do you have about this picture that you would need to have answered before you can begin to interpret it? Ask as many questions as you have.

Step Four, Have students discuss their questions with two other students in the class to try to find some answers.

Step Five, What they think the artist is trying to say (what does the piece mean), and who they think is the intended audience?

Step Six, Discuss your interpretation with the class, and be prepared to support your view by referring to specific elements of the image and what you know about the history of the time.

ACTIVITY

Text to text, text to self, text to the world

Have students think about the film, the song and the Munch painting. How do these three “texts” speak to you, to each other and to the world we live in?

Hand out three different color sticky notes to each student. Have them label one color text to text, another color text to self and the third color text to the world we live in today. After they write on each color sticky note, have them put their sticky note on a large piece of poster paper on the wall with each piece labeled text to text, text to self and text to world.

Use the template below if it would help students write down their responses:

Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World Handout

Courtesy of Facing History and Ourselves website

Think about the three “texts” provided by your teacher to make any notes. Think of ideas that you can use to answer the following questions.

1. Text-to-Text: How do the ideas in these texts remind you of each other. Complete one of the following statements: What I just read reminds me of

The ideas in this text are similar to the ideas in...

The ideas in this text are different than the ideas in the film/song/artwork because... because... because...

2. Text-to-Self: How do the ideas in this text relate to your own life, ideas, and experiences?

Complete one of the following statements:

What I just read/saw reminds me of the time when I...

I agree with/understand what I just read/saw because in my own life... I don't agree with what I just read because in my own life...

3. Text-to-World: How do the ideas in these texts relate to the larger world—past, present and future. Complete one of the following statements:

What I just read/saw makes me think about

What I just read/saw makes me think about community, nation or world) because...

What I just read/saw makes me wonder about the future because...

(event from the past) because... (event from today related to my own

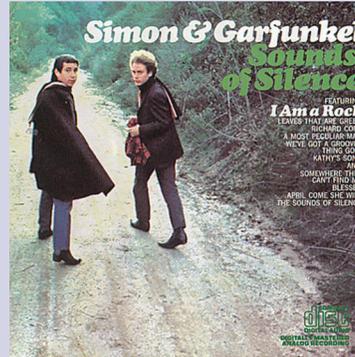
Debrief:

When they finish, have students read all the notes posted and discuss the process and the ideas that they thought about as a whole class.

On the right are two renditions of the song “The Sound of Silence”. One is the original by Simon and Garfunkel and the other is performed by a heavy metal group called Disturbed. How would you describe their interpretation as compared to the Simon and Garfunkel version? Think again about how this song relates to what you have witnessed in the film?



Disturbed
The Sound of Silence
[www.youtube.com/
watch?v=usN-pKfw6Q8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usN-pKfw6Q8)



Simon and Garunkel
The Sound of Silence
[www.youtube.com/
watch?v=4fWyzwo1xg0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fWyzwo1xg0)

How might students share their reflections on this lesson on social media? This study guide encourages students to bear witness to the stories of Holocaust survivors and shows the power of intergenerational relationships to personalize our understanding of historical events. Through social media, students can amplify their learnings and connect to real-world examples of these lessons outside of the classroom. In studying this history, we can watch for warning signs and become active citizens participating in creating a healthy, fair and just society. Relevant social media platforms include facebook, instagram, snapchat, and twitter.

1. Get involved locally

Share a story or photo from a local organization serving survivors of trauma

- Students research local organizations and share a specific post or story from the organization's social media that relates to the lessons in the study guide.

2. Join the national conversation

Students share their reflections of this lesson using the hashtag #BeAWitness

- People around the country are using the hashtag #BeAWitness to share lessons, thoughts, and reflections related to meeting Holocaust survivors and learning about the historical events of the Holocaust.

3. Share, like, comment

Much of the media within this lesson is available online at www.witnesstheaterthefilm.com. Students can share, like, and comment on relevant videos and articles.

4. Get creative

How else can students use #BeAWitness to increase awareness of the stories of Holocaust survivors and inspire others to take action?