

Holocaust scholar visits campus

by Shelvia Dancy
Editor-in-Chief

The saying goes that a picture is worth a thousand words. No one knows that better than Stephen Smith. Smith was only 14 when he visited Israel's Holocaust Memorial, Yad Vashem, but a photograph he saw changed his life forever. "I remember a picture," said Smith, "It was a picture of a mother holding a three- or four-month-old baby, and standing about four of five feet away from her was a soldier with a gun. Judging from the posture of the woman, he had just shot her. Her knees were buckling underneath her. I saw that image and I thought if I am true to myself I cannot look at this image which was taken just taken 40 ears ago on the European continent, and then just go on living my life as if it didn't matter. I believe it does matter." Spurred by the memory of the photograph years ago, Smith went on to convert a family farmhouse into the site of what is now Europe's first (and, so far, only) Holocaust memorial. The memorial, which opened two-and-a-half years ago, is named Beth Shalom. "Beth Shalom means in Hebrew 'house of peace.' We decided to call it the 'house of peace' for two reasons: one, to create a place of peace in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, but, secondly, to create a place in which we hope to work towards the creation of greater peace within our world."



Stephen Smith, founder of Europe's only Holocaust Memorial, speaks to a group of students in Dr. Carlton Wilson's history class during a visit at NCCU.

Staff photo by Paul Phipps

Smith is director and chief lecturer at Beth Shalom, which sees as many as 200 visitors a week. The soft-spoken 30-year-old, who helped finance the creation of Beth Shalom through selling miniature cakes, came to speak to students at North Carolina Central University Jan. 16. NCCU was one of three sites in the Triangle Smith visited during his week-long lecture tour of North Carolina. "I realize that for the majority of students at NCCU, this will not be a topic that is necessarily close to home, if that's the way to put it," said Smith. "But I think it's vitally important for those of outside an experience to examine it and learn from it." "One cannot teach what happened to the Jews in Europe some 60 years ago without addressing the kind of conflicts that Native Americans and African Americans have been in through this territory," he said. "It's a part of the story of the United States." Smith said Beth Shalom is more than a memorial to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, the center also is a place of education. "When we set out to create Beth Shalom we knew we wanted it to be a memorial, but we felt simply creating a memorial as in a monument was not what we wanted to do," said Smith, "because monuments can start to mean less and less as time goes by because fewer and fewer people understand what the sculpture or the stone means. "So we felt our memorial should be a site with memorial significance," he continued, "but the activities that takes place within that memorial should be educational, so we decided to create a permanent exhibit detailing the history of the Holocaust--dates, facts, places, people and so on. But we wanted to use that as a basis for groups to explore the issues which come out of that history." Thousands of children have trekked to Beth Shalom since it opened. Smith said school-organized trips comprise 60 percent of the memorial's visitors. But, said Smith, Beth Shalom is not a museum in the traditional sense. "Beth Shalom is not set up like a museum where people come through in large numbers," said Smith. "Everyone comes in pre-organized groups and they will spend up to a whole day at the center, no less than half a day. Their visit is structured and they have opportunities not only to see the exhibition, but to meet survivors of the holocaust and talk to them." Smith said survivors of the Holocaust find in Beth Shalom a place to heal and remember loved ones, but they also find a place to teach others about their own experiences.

"The survivors that come find Beth Shalom a very important place of memorial because for them they have no places where they can go to remember their families, their friends, their loved ones," said Smith. "But also, they actively engage themselves in working at Beth Shalom. We have a substantial team of survivors who go to schools and speak with children, go to colleges and speak with college students, and also work at Beth Shalom on a daily basis giving talks and leading discussions and sharing their experiences. "They're providing a very important personal insight into a period of history many of us find difficult to understand; they somehow bring us closer to it through their own personal stories," he added. Smith said the fact that Beth Shalom is Europe's first Holocaust memorial shows that perhaps the country is coming to terms with its history. "I think perhaps there was an element of guilt," he said, "knowing we had been very close to all this and yet had not really suffered it. I think there was a slight aversion to have to deal with that, and it has taken another generation to actually confront it." "Somehow those who were there did not feel quite able to do that." Smith said Beth Shalom is an important symbol for Jews and Gentiles alike. "For Jews, Beth Shalom is a symbol of goodwill, that people outside the Jewish community have taken the time and trouble to create it," he said. "I think for the survivors of the Holocaust, it is a place of memorial. For non-Jews, I think Beth Shalom is a place of education, but also a place of personal challenge." Smith said that though the Holocaust took place decades ago, people must be wary against allowing it to happen again. "One cannot ignore the fact that we live in a world of intolerance, genocide, and so forth," said Smith, "and I don't think you can simply look back at the past and say 'that was a bad period of history and it was worse than any before or after it.'" "Of course, the Holocaust was a uniquely terrible period of history, but the circumstances that created it still exist."

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Williams told the deputies that he had been searching for an item on the floor of his car, and he informed the officers there was a gun in the car, the newspaper reported.

Deputies ordered Williams to leave the car, and after searching the vehicle they found a loaded 9 mm. pistol under a towel on the floor of the passenger side.

The News & Observer also reported a plastic bag and a straw Williams dropped after stepping from the car tested positive for traces of cocaine.

In an interview with The News & Observer, Williams' attorney, Tony Axam, said it has not been determined whether the cocaine belonged to Williams.

Axam also said the amount of cocaine found on the dropped items has not been determined.

Robert E. Lawson, NCCU's public relations photographer urged people to hold judgment until all the facts of the case are known.

"It's only hearsay until you get the facts," Lawson said. "The last word on anything in this university, hiring or firing, comes from the chancellor."

At press time, Percy Luney, dean of NCCU's School of Law, was out of the country and could not be reached for comment.

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