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Wisconsin Lawyer
Vol. 81, No. 4, April 2008

Profile

Putting Out the Fires of Hate

Through storytelling, attorney Timothy Scott takes his listeners inside one of the most hateful episodes in human history - while also asking them to examine the roots and consequences of hate in our world today.

Sidebar:

- ***The Holocaust: Its Relevance Today***

by ***Dianne Molvig***

On a January morning in Medford, Wis., attorney Timothy Scott stands at the front of a room filled with some 100 people. As he relates details about a series of brutal murders, he pauses occasionally for a few seconds to allow his listeners to absorb what they're hearing. Silence hangs in the air until he resumes speaking.

Contrary to what you might think, the event unfolding here is not a homicide trial. The setting is not a courtroom, but a classroom. And Scott is neither a prosecutor nor a criminal defense lawyer, but a lawyer focusing on bankruptcy and municipal law in his practice at Bakke Norman S.C., New Richmond.

The silence that hovers in the room during Scott's pauses is sustained by a roomful of Medford seventh- and eighth-graders. That may seem incredible to any adult who's spent time amid gatherings of 12- and 13-year-olds. But these young people are listening intently to Scott's two-part, three-and-a-half-hour-long presentation about one of the worst crimes in human history: the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany.

Tim Scott

Scott's purpose, however, is to deliver more than a history lesson, as suggested by the title of his presentation - "The Holocaust: Its Relevance Today." It's part history lesson, part examination of contemporary society. Scott tells his audiences, usually seventh- to 12th-graders, "I don't believe the Holocaust is lame history. Nor do I think we should shut up about it and move on. What does the Holocaust say to us today?"

With that overarching question, he asks audience members to consider how the specter of the Holocaust persists and spawns hateful actions in today's world - not only in such faraway places as the Congo or Darfur, but also in their own communities and schools - and in each person individually.

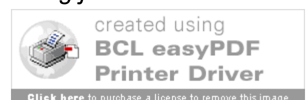
Scott presents this message about 60 times a year to students in Minnesota and Wisconsin middle and high schools. He has been doing this for about 17 years and has found he strikes a chord in his young audiences, as evidenced by their responses.

That January day in Medford, for instance, two eighth-grade boys came up to Scott after his presentation to shake his hand and thank him. "This hits you right here," said one of the boys as he struck the middle of his chest with his hand.

Sometimes Scott gets standing ovations from students at the end of his talk, and he always finds their written responses powerful. These come to him in the form of essays he asks the students to write after his visit, which schools forward to him later.

For example, some years ago one 11th grader wrote:

"When you began today's lecture, I believed all of the ideology concerning the Nazis and the Holocaust was a big joke. When I would



walk into German class, I would say [to the teacher], `Sieg Heil. Heil Hitler' or `Guten Tag, mein Fuhrer.' Now I don't think I'll be doing that."

An eighth-grade student wrote:

"Ever since you talked to us, I've been thinking about the candle, that if we find a flame [of hate] burning inside of us, we should blow it out. I have made a late New Year's resolution to blow out that flame."

Beginning with a Book

When Scott himself was an eighth-grader in Medford, he stumbled upon a book entitled *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*, by Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian Jew. Once Scott started reading it, "I couldn't put it down," he recalls. "I was mesmerized by what was described in there. I had this question: `How could so many people have gotten so involved in such horrendous evil?' I remember swearing to myself that someday I would go see where this happened."

He kept that promise. While he was a student at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., where he majored in German and humanities, he spent a semester studying in Austria. He visited the concentration camps at Dachau, Germany, and Mauthausen, Austria. "I spent an entire day wandering through Dachau asking `Why?'" he recalls.

Students at Van Brunt Middle School, Horicon, put themselves inside the story of the Holocaust as attorney Timothy Scott asks them to think about how hate touches their lives today.

He was back in Europe to visit these and other camps in the summer of 1983. By that time, he'd become a high school German teacher at St. Lawrence Seminary in Mt. Calvary, where years before he'd been a student and considered a vocation in the priesthood.

Eventually he decided to become a lawyer, like his father and three of his siblings. After graduating from the University of Minnesota Law School in 1988, he got a fellowship to study German law and earned his LL.M. degree at Eberhard-Karls Universität, Tübingen, Germany. He lived there for two years and continued to explore Holocaust history.

Back in Wisconsin, various groups invited Scott to talk about the concentration camps he'd visited. His presentations to school groups became a fairly regular activity in the early 1990s, when Scott was a law clerk for Judge Thomas Utschig at the U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Eau Claire. He became friends with a local high school German teacher, who asked Scott to speak to his classes.

"One teacher talked to another, and the calls started coming in," he says. The word got out to still more teachers when Scott spoke at teachers' conventions in Eau Claire.

In 1994, Scott joined the Bakke Norman firm, which has a long tradition of community service. To honor George Norman, who died in 1994, the firm launched a public lecture series focusing on human rights issues. Scott was an organizer for the lectures, which featured such speakers as Alfons Heck, a general in the Hitler youth organization; Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mohandas Gandhi; Martin Luther King III; and Sister Helen Prejean of *Dead Man Walking* fame.

While Sister Prejean was in Wisconsin in late 1999 to give a lecture, she did an interview with a Twin Cities television station. She suggested to the television reporters that they talk to Scott about his efforts to spread awareness about the Holocaust.

Not long after that, the station did a five-minute segment about Scott on the evening news, followed by a morning show with viewer call-ins. That led to more requests pouring in from schools wanting to hear his presentation. "I got inundated," Scott says.

From mid-November to mid-May each year, Scott presents two talks a week, on average, to school audiences. Schools are not his only venue. He's also spoken to professional organizations, church groups, teacher in-service trainings, social workers, college students, and prison inmates.

He emphasizes that he can do this only because of the support from his colleagues at Bakke Norman and the nature of his work schedule. As a municipal lawyer, much of his work involves attending evening municipal board meetings, allowing him to give daytime presentations at schools. He relinquished his partnership in the firm several years ago so he could continue to do his presentations, while still practicing law.

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Creating a Mental Movie

Scott's program has evolved over the years, but it's always relied heavily on putting the listener inside the story of the Holocaust. He uses only a few visuals, preferring to let listeners create their own mental images as the story unfolds.

"Storytelling is incredibly effective with all ages," Scott observes. "Young people often write to me and say, `I went home that night and thought I had watched a movie.'"

He tells his audiences that during the Holocaust the Nazis murdered an estimated 7 to 10 million Jews, gays, Romani, and members of other targeted groups. But then he brings that statistic down to the experiences of one individual. In the story, he puts the listener in the shoes of a 10-year-old Jewish youngster living in a Ukrainian village, leaving the listener to choose the gender and other traits as he or she creates mental images.

As the story begins, the 10-year-old hears the fearful whisperings of his or her parents, when they think their children are out of earshot, about violence against Jews and others in Germany. When the protagonist is a bit older, the mother tells about Krystallnacht, a night in 1938 when the Nazis dragged Jews from their beds and killed them in the streets and destroyed some 8,000 Jewish businesses and 1,000 synagogues.

By the time the story's main character is nearing high school graduation, all Jews are banned from universities, dashing his or her dream of becoming a doctor. Then one day the entire family gets orders to report to the town square for "resettlement." Through two hours of storytelling, Scott takes the listener into the horrors of the cattle car and the death camp, through the eyes of the story's young central character.

Early on in presenting to school classes, Scott recognized the need to add a second component to his program. This stemmed out of "having open eyes and ears while living in Wisconsin," he says. "I'd hear comments about the Hmong, or the blacks, or the Indians, or the gays - you name it - often from people I'd never have expected to say such things. It shocked me at times. And I thought, `Wait a minute. That's how it started in Germany.'"

From History to Current Events

"*Gays and lesbians are wrong and they shouldn't be in the U.S. Catholics, I feel sorry for them, because they don't believe in the real God - Jesus Christ and God. I'm not really racist, but I dislike Indians today … Indians shouldn't be in Wisconsin."* - excerpt from eighth-grader's essay

"I see the spirit of the Holocaust every day. People are calling people fags, niggers, and losers. They call me that, sometimes every day. And I know how those others feel; it hurts. I mean people are teasing others so bad that they don't feel they deserve to live anymore, so they commit suicide." - excerpt from ninth-grader's essay

The second part of Scott's program focuses on the "flames of hate," as he describes them, that rage today close to home. To illustrate examples, he reads aloud from newspaper clippings about recent occurrences in Wisconsin and neighboring states, as well as from students' essays from other schools - or even from written threats he's received from a few students. He forewarns his audience members they're about to hear offensive material, but he doesn't censor because eliminating offensive words often would make sentences unintelligible.

Scott remembers one incident in a small-town high school in western Wisconsin when he was reading aloud from a Madison newspaper story about a group of thugs who set out, they said, "to beat the s*** out of that faggot." Four 11th-grade boys in Scott's audience broke out in raucous laughter, something he says happens rarely. He paused for a few seconds, said nothing, and continued recounting examples of other episodes of hate, prejudice, and racism happening in our state or nearby.

As he did so, he became aware that something else was happening in the room, although at first he wasn't sure what it was. Then he noticed two Hmong girls - the only two in the room - who were crying. Clearly, the racist remarks and incidents they were hearing about were all too familiar in their own experiences.

"Their crying became more obvious and pronounced," Scott recalls. "Then a girl sitting next to one of them put her arm around her. A boy sitting behind them reached out to put his hands on their shoulders. Gradually everyone in the room became aware of what was going on. There was a palpable, collective sadness that went through that room.

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"The right words don't always come to me, but that day they did. I said, `A few minutes ago I read something that was hateful, and four of you laughed. I don't know that I'll ever understand that laughter. But I do understand these tears. That's how it is when prejudice, hate, and racism come home and touch someone we know and care about. No one in this room is laughing now.'"

On a Mission

"I don't care one bit about those hubcap stealing, drug-dealing, Velcro hair, big-lipped, Alabama porch monkeys (niggers) and those short, slant-eyed, flat-faced, rice-chewing, dog-eating, tax-evading, welfare-junkie, smelling-worse-than-death gooks." - excerpt from eighth-grader's essay

"Some of the people at [our high school] scare me. When they grow up and are living in the real world, what will it be like? I think we've always stayed just barely within the bounds of disaster. The spirit of the Holocaust is definitely alive today. I see it every day and it sucks." - excerpt from 10th-grader's essay

Scott has no illusions he'll get through to everyone in his audiences. All he can do is plant the seeds of new ways of thinking that might take root someday.

"I'm the kind of person who just has to do something like this," he says. "I've always felt that when I come to the end of my life, I want to be able to say, `I gave it my best. I made a difference.'"

He admits that giving the presentations is draining, in terms of both time and energy. And during each program he, too, relives the Holocaust horrors. But in spite of the darkness of the story, he sees a positive impact.

When asked what keeps him going, he immediately responds, "Without question, it's the essays I get from young people who can tell right from wrong. It's the eloquence of their words." A case in point, extracted from the essay of an 11th-grader:

"It appears that many ignore the words of hate, allow them to roll off their backs. Some cringe at the sound of the filth and even fewer stand up and shout the two most important words that could be said at a time like that - `Stop it!' It is because of the lack of courage that the flame of hate burns, and to answer the question posed during your presentation - the Holocaust does live on."

Dianne Molvig operates Access Information Service, a Madison writing and editing service. She is a frequent contributor to area publications

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