

WITNESSING HISTORY

Kiaran Drew



The Sydney Jewish Museum brings the memory of the Holocaust to life for 30,000 NSW school children each year. For many, the greatest impact comes from their encounter with one of the Survivors who volunteer at the Museum. To preserve these testimonies for future generations, the Museum recently embarked on a remarkable program using advanced, interactive video technology. Through the long and emotionally intense filming sessions, Kiaran, a highly trained emergency services paramedic was on hand to help monitor the Survivors' health and, if needed, call a halt to proceedings. The experience changed his understanding of the Holocaust.



More than books and history lessons, the first-hand accounts from those who survived the camps in World War II are vital in keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive. For the many Survivors who have volunteered at the Museum over the years, it has been a life-long dedication – to tell the story of their suffering so others will not have to repeat it in the future.

To keep these stories alive, the Museum collaborated last year with the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Dimensions in Testimony program. The program uses an array of cameras and natural-language technology to record individual answers to hundreds of interview questions. The result is an interactive biography, allowing viewers to enter into a dialogue with the video image of the Survivor – asking questions and hearing responses in real-time, lifelike conversations.

To build up the required bank of questions and answers, the recording sessions can last for many hours over multiple sessions. For the six Survivors – aged from 84 to 101 years' old – who agreed to participate in the Museum's project, the sessions would be both emotionally and physically stressful.

The Museum reached out to Tim Cohen, General Manager of Integrity Health & Safety, to provide highly trained paramedics to monitor the Survivor's vital signs during the filming sessions. "It was amazing to see the care the Museum felt for the Survivors," said Tim. "Even though the hospital is just 200 metres away from where they were filming, they wanted trained paramedics right there in the room with the Survivors and they made it clear that the medical staff would have an absolute veto right to halt the filming if they deemed it necessary."

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Kiaran, one of the company's most senior and experienced paramedics was assigned to the project. Given the advanced age and medical conditions of the Survivors, Kiaran brought in specialised cardiac monitoring equipment so

they could measure vital signs throughout the recording process.

"We got to spend a lot of time with the Survivors and listened for many hours as they told their stories. Even though I had learned about the Holocaust at school, I realised that I had been oblivious to so much of what happened – the different types of camps that were set up, the death marches they endured, the process for separating arrivals at the camps.

The stories were heartbreaking. "One lady spoke about how she arrived on the cattle train at Auschwitz where the men were told to go one side, the women the other. It was the last time she saw her father and brother. When I looked around in the control room people were reaching for tissues and everyone was having a tear. It was very powerful. I don't think you'd be human if you didn't feel the emotion of it."

For Kiaran, the experience also reinforced some of his already strong-held beliefs. "I've never been able to get my head around racism," he said, "not liking a person because of the colour of their skin, or because they're gay or straight, or because they're Jewish or Catholic or Muslim. I've always been about person-to-person and this has cemented those feelings."

One of the themes that he kept hearing for the Survivors was that they could not believe that a country that was so 'advanced and smart' could have allowed such terrible things to happen. "It's really important for the youngsters to know what happened," he said. "I've got two kids, a daughter of 19 and a son of 17, and I want them to know more about this." He said he will be taking the Museum up on an offer to give his family a tour through their exhibits.

Kiaran's experience with the Survivors had a profound impact on him. The company he works for, Integrity Health, is Australia's largest indigenous-owned health and safety services provider. In the past, The Museum and the indigenous communities have worked together on projects – there is a tragic crossover in the historical trauma suffered by the peoples of both communities.

Reflecting on his experience, and the important message the Survivors have, not just for the Jewish people, but for humanity itself, Kiaran said, "I was thinking about the parallel – both communities go back thousands of years – and here were these two ancient cultures looking after each other." Person-to-person, as he would say.