

Testimony for Oregon Senate Bill 664 submitted by Rhonda Fink-Whitman:

As a longtime Holocaust educator and the author of *94 Maidens* <https://amzn.to/2aGS2pM>, a Holocaust story inspired by the true events of how my mother survived the Holocaust, and the host, director and producer of *The Mandate Video* on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4V4bmm6yJMw> in which I interviewed Pennsylvania college students in 2013 to shine a light on their lack of knowledge about the Holocaust, WWII, and genocide, I wish to thank the Oregon state legislature for recognizing the importance of mandating Holocaust education with the introduction of Senate Bill 664 on Wednesday, February 20, 2019.

A couple of years ago, after seeing my viral video online and reading about my advocacy to mandate Holocaust and genocide education in Pennsylvania and subsequently in Michigan, Rhode Island, Kentucky, and Connecticut, Holocaust survivor and fellow author Alter Wiener emailed me and asked if I would help him get a similar bill passed in Oregon. We went right to work. Over a period of about two years, a colorful cast of well-meaning characters stepped up to join Team Oregon, but unfortunately, the process seemed too daunting, and one by one, each of them eventually gave up on our efforts and drifted away. It wasn't until Claire Sarnowski and her mother Carol joined the team and pitched the idea to Senator Rob Wagner that Alter Wiener's dream of mandating Oregon and my dream of mandating every U.S. state took a giant leap forward.

Senate Bill 664 is unique in that it is student-driven. Every other state that I have supported and guided through the process has been solely attempted and achieved by adults. Young Claire Sarnowski's involvement makes this bill extra special. Oregon should be proud! Additionally, the combination of Holocaust survivor, Alter and his student, Claire shows the impact that this type of education has on children and clearly demonstrates its importance.

In 1945, General Eisenhower ordered his troops that were liberating the despicable and unfathomable Nazi concentration camps in Europe to take photos of what they found there so that the world could never deny, whitewash, or sanitize the Holocaust. But sadly, only 74 years later, there are those who still try to do just that. Teaching students the lessons of the Holocaust which include themes of bullying, resistance, tolerance, acceptance, scapegoating, what happens when hate is permitted to go unchecked, being an upstander and not a bystander, and so many others, is key to safeguarding our future as a human race.

As the daughter of a survivor who came out of the devastation and ashes of those Nazi atrocities against innocent human beings, I advocate for Holocaust education; not by choice, but rather duty. In a world that is increasingly Anti-Semitic, we have a responsibility to arm our children with the truth. Recent statistics prove that students do not know about the Holocaust because no one, not teachers nor parents, have exposed them to the information. In most states, it's hit or miss. Currently in Oregon and 39 other states, if a student, like Claire Sarnowski, has a teacher who feels it's important to teach Holocaust, then that student receives

the information. If not, well then, we have the bright, articulate college kids who are studying at the most prestigious universities in America, including Ivy League universities, who appear in my video to show us the results of not knowing what the Holocaust was, or when it happened, or where, or how many were murdered, or even who orchestrated the horror. And *that* is a danger to humanity which puts all of us at great risk.

We've been failing our children. But we can fix that right now by passing Senate Bill 664. I am confident that Oregon's leaders will make sure that educators are properly trained to teach such a sensitive subject and that curriculum is crafted accurately and age-appropriately.

Let's make Oregon the eleventh state to mandate Holocaust and genocide education so that we can raise generations of students who know, like Claire Sarnowski, the facts about the most horrific state-sponsored genocide in human history, so that they can prevent another Holocaust from ever happening again.

After all he endured in the Holocaust and his endless hours of telling his story to students at Oregon's schools, Alter Wiener's sad and sudden death reminds us that survivors, WWII liberators, and other eye-witnesses to the Holocaust won't be with us forever. Meeting survivors hugely impacts how children learn about and remember the Holocaust. Claire Sarnowski is a prime example of that. The clock is ticking and the time to mandate Oregon is now.

In blessed memory of Alter Wiener and in honor of the tenacity, due diligence, and tireless efforts of Claire and Carol Sarnowski and Senator Rob Wagner, I thank you for permitting me to submit my testimony in support of Oregon Senate Bill 664.

Respectfully,

Rhonda Fink-Whitman

Author, Educator, Spokesperson, Holocaust education advocate

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