

Educator promotes tolerance through cultural awareness

Elaine Cohen
Special to The CJN

In the spring of 2010, Donna Friedman-Perlin, a teacher, received the Riva and Thomas O. Hecht Scholarship for educators who teach about the Holocaust. This enabled her to pursue an intensive, three-week summer program at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem.

"I was one of 35 educators from all over the world, and only five of us were Jew-

ish," Friedman-Perlin said. "In fact, I was the only Jewish teacher from Montreal.

"Classes were held from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., but we were dismissed earlier on Friday to observe Shabbat. Sunday, we were back in school. Weekends, we visited Masada, the Dead Sea and many other places. We were given teaching tools, studied the Bible and Jewish history."

A graduate of Solomon Schechter Academy and Bialik High School, Friedman-Perlin received a solid grounding in Judaic studies before attending Mariano-

polis College and McGill University.

For the past three years, Friedman-Perlin, who has a bachelor of commerce, a bachelor of education and a master's degree in educational leadership, has been teaching in a non-Jewish environment. Outside of the classroom she has been busy developing courses and broadening her knowledge of the Holocaust.

In 2009, she attended educator workshops at Federation CJA geared to teaching about the Holocaust, where world-renowned scholars and educators addressed students.

This past spring, she was invited to the sponsor's home and addressed the recipients of the 2011 Riva and Thomas O. Hecht Scholarship.

Reflecting on her experiences in the classroom, Friedman-Perlin said the program in Israel boosted her knowledge and she returned with excellent teaching tools. Even if the Holocaust isn't part of the program, or the children are in kindergarten or Grade 2, teachers can take a stance to combat antisemitism and prejudice by teaching youths to respect their neighbours' beliefs and practices.

In 2009, at John F. Kennedy High School (English Montreal School Board), she taught about the Holocaust in connection with the ethics curriculum.

"Most of my students were unaware of the Holocaust or the consequences of

befriending a Jew," Friedman-Perlin said. "After they heard the story, they all related to the effect on innocent children."

She showed the film *Schindler's List* and led class discussions. "We studied the period in history leading up to the Holocaust and World War II. Then I said, 'I have a story to tell you,' and I told them how my grandfather's family perished."

In 2010, she was assigned to St. Monica's School (EMSB) and developed additional lesson plans and modules for Grade 6 students.

"This elementary school is located in N.D.G. and some of the children were familiar with Jews living in the area," Friedman-Perlin said. "Besides, my partner that teaches French is Jewish, and she had also signed up for workshops at Federation CJA. So, I felt more at ease."

As part of the course, the students read and discussed a book from the Holocaust Remembrance Series for Young Adults. They related well to *The Righteous Smuggler* by Debbie Spring. The protagonist is a 14-year-old non-Jewish boy in Amsterdam, whose best friend is Jewish. "The students were asked to identify with him. We also visited the Montreal Holocaust Centre, and a Holocaust survivor came to speak to the class. He was impressed with the children's intelligent questions."

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Teacher's enthusiasm stems from her mother



It runs in the family: Beverlee Friedman-Perlin and daughter Donna Friedman-Perlin share a passion for teaching. [Photo courtesy of Donna Friedman-Perlin]

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During one lesson, the students realized that in the Nazi regime, a Jewish teacher would be ousted. "They were upset when they realized my partner and I would have been unable to teach them."

The students also viewed two films, *Paper Clips* and *The Boy with the Striped Pajamas*.

Weaving the topic into the writing and literature program, Friedman-Perlin presented *I never saw a butterfly*, a collection of art and poetry by Jewish children at the Theresienstadt concentration camp. The students had to write their own poems and identify with the subject matter. "They couldn't believe what had happened and that nobody had stood up."

Reflecting on her love of teaching, Friedman-Perlin believes her mother's enthusiasm for the profession was infectious. "Throughout all the years, my mother [Bever-

lee Friedman-Perlin] has taught, she has consistently arrived home happy each day," she said, adding they are both employed by the EMSB. Initially, Beverlee taught

at Algonquin Elementary School, but later moved to the adult sector. Both mother and daughter use digital technology and find it enhances their teaching.

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