

## Lessons from the past: Pizitz teacher Kelly Sorrell aims to increase Holocaust education

by NEAL EMBRY  
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Photo by Erin Nelson.





Photo courtesy of Kelly Sorrell.

When Kelly Sorrell began her teaching career, she realized she only knew what she'd been taught about the Holocaust, which wasn't much.

That education could be summed up in about two sentences, Sorrell said. Hitler hated Jews, and 6 million died during the Holocaust.

"I think in the U.S., we don't do as good a job educating about the Holocaust as they do in Europe," Sorrell said.

Europe, Sorrell said, has many of the sites of World War II and the Holocaust, which brings that particular time in history to life and is a visual reminder of what happened many decades ago.

While those sites aren't here in America, Sorrell said it's still vital to remember not just the events of the Holocaust, but also what led to its horrors and the heroes who helped put an end to it.

It's something Sorrell has been trying to do for the past few years at Pizitz Middle School with her sixth-grade social studies class. For her efforts, Sorrell has, for each of the past two summers, received a grant from the Birmingham Holocaust Education Center, which has allowed her to travel to Washington, D.C., in 2018 to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and to Columbia, New York, this past summer. She was one of only two Alabama teachers to receive the grant to attend.

Sorrell attended workshops centered on expanding Holocaust education for teachers all across the country, and she said it has greatly benefited her and helped her be better prepared to teach her middle school students.

The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, which Sorrell visited in 2019, helped her understand much of the psychology and background of Hitler and how he was motivated to carry out his deeds. It also taught her about the ongoing work of survivors today, who continue to try and talk less about the Nazis and more about those who protected the Jewish people and other minorities, along with survivors from the war.

The grants she has received and the workshops she has been able to attend have helped Sorrell grow in her knowledge of the Holocaust and given her different ideas as to how to best teach her students about it.

"It's given me more confidence in teaching the subject," Sorrell said.

Interacting with teachers all over the country also helps, as teachers help each other improve, too, Sorrell said.

Workshops and continuing education have been a part of Sorrell's professional life from its inception. Right after she began teaching and realized she needed to know more about the Holocaust, Sorrell

immediately began traveling to any and all workshops in the area that she could in order to become a better teacher, including some at the Birmingham Holocaust Education Center.

Sixth-grade students are not always able to fully understand the brutality of the Holocaust, Sorrell said. So instead of using graphic photos and focusing on the more violent aspects of the event, she teaches them about those who worked to hide Jews and other minorities, and she works to help her students understand that, in the same way, they ought to stand up to bullies and those who hurt others.

“They really can’t fathom how this was allowed to happen,” Sorrell said.

Sorrell said she teaches the Holocaust right after she teaches students about the Jim Crow South and racism closer to home. She recently learned that studies have shown Hitler may have been inspired by Jim Crow laws and the racism displayed in the American South during that time.

“I think it helps them have an understanding of human nature, how bullies can be so successful when people let them do it, and how they can stand up and help people,” Sorrell said.

New Pizitz Principal Chris Pennington, in a written statement, said Sorrell is a valued member of the Pizitz family.

“Mrs. Sorrell has established herself here at Pizitz as a teacher who embraces innovative learning,” Pennington said. “Students in her classes routinely participate in project-based learning activities and multiple forms of assessment for content mastery. She is also known as a teacher who values the opportunity to build positive relationships with her students. As an administrator that strongly promotes these two qualities, I am proud to have Mrs. Sorrell as part of the Pirate family.”

At one of the workshops she attended, Sorrell heard from Paul Salmons, who discussed teaching about the Holocaust through the use of artifacts. She has tried to incorporate that into her instruction, using diaries, journals and other materials with which sixth-grade students can interact.

In the spring, after spending the summer of 2018 in D.C., Sorrell was able to bring Heidi Fishman, the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, to Pizitz to speak at a school assembly. Fishman, an author, led a writing workshop and spoke about researching a book they may write, Sorrell said.

In the future, Sorrell said she plans to continue her Holocaust education and will apply for a workshop in Europe.

While students can understand more and more about the Holocaust as they get older, Sorrell said it’s important to lay that foundation and make sure students are aware of it so nothing like it happens again.

“I think we have a lot of denial about it,” Sorrell said. “Not Holocaust deniers, but ... people don’t want to look at something that’s hard.”

While no Holocaust sites are in the United States, many survivors and their children and grandchildren moved here after the war, Sorrell said. It’s important to improve the education of what happened to them and their families so they can be remembered and honored, she said.

Teaching her students about the Holocaust helps them become better citizens and understand how history is a “collection of stories” of real-life people and places, Sorrell said.

“It’s not all dust and dead people.”

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