

'Paper Clips' Students Fasten Ties Between Whitwell and Philly

Dalton Slatton, a Christian student from Whitwell, Tenn., wore a Star of David around his neck as he toured the National Museum of American Jewish History on Nov. 3.

"This is my remembrance," Slatton, a 10th-grader at Whitwell High School, said of the necklace. He was one of about 50 people visiting Philadelphia from the small Tennessee town where students helped build a memorial filled with millions of paper clips to represent those Jews who died in the Holocaust.

"This is how I hold the Holocaust project and the Jewish people close to my heart every day," the student said.

Slatton and others from Whitwell have visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and concentration camps in Poland. But this was their first group trip to Philadelphia, a city with strong ties to the world-famous memorial.

Their visit came just days before the 75th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the "Night of Broken Glass" on Nov. 9-10, 1938, which marked the first major pogrom against the Jews in Germany and Austria.

Since the project started in 1998 with efforts to collect 6 million paper clips, Whitwell students and educators have not only far surpassed their goal but also have attracted visitors to their town from around the globe. They have been the subject of a documentary, *Paper Clips*, and, they say, they've helped change the worldview of residents in their rural town.

Har Zion Temple in Penn Valley has also hosted Sandra Roberts, the Whitwell teacher who helped launch the project, and has twice sent congregants and students [to visit the Tennessee memorial](#). And Harold Sampson, a member of Broomall's Congregation Beth El-Ner Tamid who visited Whitwell, was so inspired by the project that he [commissioned a paper clip sculpture](#) that will be dedicated at the synagogue on Nov. 10.

This past weekend, families on the Main Line got the chance to play host, giving their visitors a taste of Jewish life on the East Coast with Shabbat services and programs at synagogues, including Beth Am Israel, Har Zion, Adath Israel and Beth David Reform Congregation.

Students from both Whitwell and Philadelphia spoke about how much they had learned from one other and about

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By: Eric Berger



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Jessica Elsea was one of about 50 people from Whitwell, Tenn., to visit Philadelphia and tour the National Museum of American Jewish History.

the friendships they had formed in such a short time. For the Main Line hosts, it was a chance to see that their differences with people from small-town America aren't so vast or as important as what they share in common. For the visitors, the weekend provided an opportunity to see the Jewish culture and religious practices that many of them had only read about or seen in films.

As he neared the end of the museum tour, Slatton said the most memorable parts of the weekend were "just meeting the people, going to Shabbat services, experiencing the culture of the Jewish people, coming to the synagogues.

"And really just coming together as one," he continued. "That's really what this trip is about."

Slatton said participating in his school district's Holocaust project had helped him decide that he wanted to become a politician.

"Just the fact that one person who is in a powerful position could get by with killing 11 million people — I can't imagine that. I can't imagine just standing by and allowing that to happen like so many people did," he said. "And for me, it taught me to never forget, and I want to be in a place where if something like this happens again, I can stand up and do something about it."

David Kestenbaum, a 10th-grader at William Penn Charter School, met Slatton and others during a visit to Whitwell last year. He described their interactions as an "amazing experience," knowing that "years from now, I'm still going to be talking with them."

"While we seem so different, based on our religion and based upon where we live, as they're from a poorer community in Tennessee and we're from a slightly more affluent community in Philadelphia, we're not really that different, and I'm hoping that this can be the first step towards achieving a better world," said Kestenbaum, whose family has helped fund programs between the two communities and hosted Slatton and others over the weekend.

Lily Stein, a 10th grade student at Harriton High School, described the Whitwell girls whom she met two years ago while visiting there and then hosted this weekend as "sisters."

"If they are asking me in synagogue, 'What are they saying?' — I don't know either," Stein said, referring to the prayers in Hebrew. "But if they ask, 'What's the Jew-cap?' I say 'It's a yarmulke' and if they say, 'What's the scarf they put around their neck?' I say 'It's a tallis.' "

Kammy Smith, a Whitwell 10th-grader staying with Stein who serves as a tour guide at her hometown memorial, said the most important part of such an experience is returning home and "sharing your experiences," because "many people don't know about synagogues and Jewish rituals."

Jessica Elsea, an 11th-grader from Whitwell who has also visited Poland, said that before visiting Philadelphia, she was nervous about how she would be received.

"They live in a whole different world than we do," she said of her hosts. "They have these huge mansions and we have little, itty-bitty houses and low income. But it didn't matter where we were from — they still made us feel like family and treated us like we were their own kids."