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Painful history kept alive

Holocaust survivor works with Jewish federation

By: Erin Madden

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Joe Riesenbach in front of exhibit that tells his story and those of other Holocaust survivors. (

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It's been more than 70 years, but the memories are still vivid, forever burned into his mind.

Joe Riesenbach, a Holocaust survivor, was just 10 years old the first time his family's stately Polish home was invaded by German soldiers. It remained occupied by the soldiers on and off for four years until the family was finally forced out with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

After weeks on the run, hiding in fields and begging for food at strangers' doors in the middle of the night, his parents, both successful business people, found a family willing to take them all in. For more than two years, together with his parents and two sisters, Riesenbach remained hidden in that family's home, avoiding capture and ultimately the concentration camps that had been built in their area.

"Our freedom was gone. We couldn't be in business anymore and I couldn't go to school. I finished Grade 4 by European standards," said Riesenbach.

Each day, he carries with him the memories of those six years and, while they're painful, he never wants to forget them. He also doesn't want others to forget them and that's why the 82-year-old volunteers with the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg, an organization dedicated to creating and sustaining a strong and vibrant Jewish community.

Since becoming a volunteer with the group 12 years ago, he has chaired the Holocaust Awareness Committee, and helped raise funds for several projects, including a permanent exhibit housed at the Rady Jewish Community Centre, which features his story, along with the stories of many other survivors.

"The Holocaust survivors are shrinking away. Eventually, in another five, 10 years tops, there will be no survivors, so we had to keep this alive for the next generation and the next generation and so on," said Riesenbach of why he feels the need to be involved.

That's why he also does educational presentations to school groups about his experiences. He said it's important to share his story and the history of the Holocaust with the younger generations now, so they can not only learn from it but benefit from the first-hand accounts of those who lived through it.

The Jewish Federation of Winnipeg has many volunteer opportunities in a wide variety of program areas for those looking to get involved. Volunteers can host newcomers on exploratory visits, help to plan events, or assist with family programming.

For more information on the federation, or to become a volunteer, please call 477-7400. More information can also be found online (at www.jewishwinnipeg.org).

If you know a special volunteer who strives to make their community a better place to live, please contact Erin Madden at erinmadden@shaw.ca

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