

The Art of Remembering

How a small-town church is honoring Holocaust survivors through Spirit-led art—and seeing miracles along the way

Nahum Burgeson had never held a paintbrush before attempting what many professional artists wouldn't dare try. Only 13 years old at the time, he wanted to convey on canvas the heart-wrenching pain behind the Holocaust. He had no fine arts training and had only begun to learn about the millions of Jews murdered during World War II. So he did the only thing he knew to do: He cried out to Jesus for help.

Requiring more than 500 hours of work, his 4-by-4-foot oil painting, called *The Last Witnesses*, today leaves observers speechless with its detailed rendering of a mountain of 300,000-plus shoes—each unique in color and texture, representing individual lives—from an Auschwitz concentration camp. Holocaust survivors, World War II veterans and international dignitaries have stood before the painting and wept, as they have with the other 600-plus pieces in a Holocaust memorial created by Burgeson and his school classmates.

✖ Nahum Burgeson's The Last
Witnesses (©Nahum
Burgeson)

That's because just as each brushstroked shoe represents someone's life, each piece of artwork in the Word of Faith Christian School Holocaust Museum not only tells its own story of remembrance, but also depicts a multilayered miracle taking place in tiny Spindale, N.C.

For starters, the 125-student Word of Faith Christian School

(WFCS) has no art department, no art teacher and has never even brought in a professional artist to help. Instead, students rely on the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer.

“I know without a doubt it was God that flowed through us to do this,” Burgeson says. “When we first started, many times we would have a problem getting the paintings to look right. But as we cried to Jesus, you could see the fruit. The more and more we cried out, the better we would get.”

Virtually every student—from kindergarten- to college-age—has a similar testimony of divine teaching, and the passion for Israel bleeds through in each painting, sculpture and model. The works, all of which are based on actual photographs, paintings or artifacts, are so impressive that WFCS is frequently invited to showcase the massive exhibit around the nation. To date, the church-based school has taken the museum on the road (via multiple 18-wheelers) dozens of times, from New Mexico to Texas to Florida. It’s been shared at colleges, public schools, Jewish community centers, political gatherings and Christians United for Israel events and has even been shared with Holocaust survivors and liberators in Sweden.

WFCS students 
collaborated on this oil
painting depicting
Hungarian Jews being
“selected” at Auschwitz in
1944 (©WFCS Students)

“I had never seen such work from students of their age,” says Michael Berenbaum, the founding project director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. “To put it mildly, I was floored. It showed me what could be done when teachers and students work together and endeavor together to give creative expression to what they study.”

Indeed, the project originated from students studying the Holocaust and, through the Holy Spirit's move in the classroom, their developing a deep-seated love for the Jewish people. Out of that, God birthed a communal passion to honor what is now a generation literally down to its last few.

"We still have World War II veterans alive who saw the carnage in the death camps," says Karel Reynolds, director of the WFCS Holocaust Museum. "We still have Holocaust survivors alive today who speak to these students and tell them what happened to them. But soon all we will have left is their memory. ... The students are well aware that we must document this history. We must make a living memorial [so] that people will never forget what happened in Nazi Germany and what happened to the Jewish people."

 A 4-by-6-foot oil painting of Nazi soldiers questioning Jews in 1943 Warsaw (©WFCS Students)

Observers such as Berenbaum and the many families with Holocaust connections certainly appreciate the memorial for its commitment to continue the legacy of those who suffered. Yet what most are unaware of is the behind-the-scenes backdrop that's just as remarkable as 125 untrained students suddenly painting masterpieces.

Sharing Persecution

Since 1979, Word of Faith Fellowship, a vibrant Spirit-filled church about 70 miles west of Charlotte, N.C., has endured its own history of persecution. The tight-knit congregation of 750 people houses WFCS and, for whatever reason, has been a lightning rod for controversy for more than a decade. Death threats. Drive-by shootings. Lawsuits. Investigations. Child abuse allegations. Assault charges. Boycotts.

The attacks—some short-lived, others lasting years and costing

the church millions of dollars—have undoubtedly left their mark but have yet to destroy believers' passion to see God move.

Amid a season of unusually fierce opposition, including North Carolina's Department of Social Services taking custody of some WFCS children, founding co-pastor Jane Whaley says God reminded the church of the persecution, hatred and anti-Semitism that His chosen people, the Jews, have so often faced.

"All it takes is one lie and one person to believe that lie for it to spread and have something like the Holocaust happen," Whaley says.

Museum Director Karel  Reynolds (second from right) shows a model of Jerusalem to rabbis at a Christians United for Israel event in Washington, D.C. (©wfcs)

As the church and school delved deeper into studying the Holocaust, Whaley says, "It took our eyes off ourselves and put them on God and how He was going to carry us through this. ... God showed us so much love going through the persecution that we did, and out of that place we can impart that love that God has put in our hearts for the Jewish people. We can reach out and let them know that God loves them and we love them."

The church not only began to recognize a global resurgence of anti-Semitism, but it also sensed an urgency to raise a younger generation to discern the times and understand they could prophetically stand with Israel by refusing to forget—or revise—Holocaust history.

"When you turn on the news today or pick up a newspaper or

listen to what's being said today, you hear the atrocities that are once again being threatened against the statehood of Israel," Reynolds says. "The students see how living and real history is ... and along with our pastors, we have purposed in our hearts that we're not going to sit back in our generation. We're going to stand, we're going to support Israel, we're going to speak out and we're not going to be silent."

✖ WFCS alumnus Nahum
Burgeson (©wfcs)

To that degree, Reynolds says every student who studies at WFCS becomes a "living witness" of the truth about the Holocaust. So far, the school's Spirit-led approach to education is yielding undeniable fruit: Students' SAT scores regularly rank among the highest in the region, and more than 90 percent go on to attend college (with 95 percent of those earning honors). Last year, six graduates received full-load scholarships to law schools around the nation. And all this from a private school that doesn't charge tuition, due to what Whaley says was a directive from God to ensure the school was an extension of the church's ministry to families and the community.

Why Christians?

This ministry mindset continues through the WFCS Holocaust Museum, as one of the project's most remarkable elements is how God has used it to link the Christian and Jewish communities. Students and leaders have held exhibits at countless pro-Israel Christian events, yet some of the most memorable showcases have been those hosted at synagogues and Jewish community centers, where rabbis have wept while walking through the museum and have called it a "holy work" that's been "ordained by God."

Reynolds says that beyond people's awe of the artwork itself, the most common reaction from Jewish observers—especially

Holocaust survivors—is a blend of gratitude and perplexity. She remembers one couple who survived Auschwitz and married a year after liberation. As they walked through the Holocaust Museum, their tears flowed not only from reliving the harsh memories, but also in disbelief over the question of why anyone would devote so much to remembering the horrors they'd been through and honoring those who had survived.

WFCS alumna Daniella  Caulder tells visiting students about the artworks' real-life history during a 2012 exhibition in Miami (©wfcs)

“They were overwhelmed that children had done this—that young people had devoted so much to this,” Reynolds says. “But when they found out they were *Christian* young people, they said, ‘Why would Christians do this?’ They began to ask some of our young people, and those young people told them how much they loved Israel and loved God’s chosen people and wanted to lay their lives down to speak out in our generation to bless them, to honor them and to show them the love of God.”

Last year, the Falic family, owners of Duty Free Americas, sponsored an exhibit at the Michael-Ann Russell Jewish Community Center in Miami, where several Holocaust survivors attended and shared stories. Among those was Hungarian Holocaust survivor Jack Gluck, who had a similar reaction upon discovering the museum: “It brought back all of the feelings that I had for the people [who saved me]. I said to myself, ‘It must have been unbelievable people—righteous Christians—that saved us.’ I never had the ability to thank any of them, so [when I heard about this], I said, ‘I have to come back. I have to see these people.’ They’re full of love, full of kindness, and they’re just beautiful people doing such beautiful things.”

It's comments like these that prove God can take a literal blank canvas or an actual lump of clay and, even in a child's hands, mend hearts and meld generations for the sake of His purposes.

✖ WFCS recently purchased a
9,000-square foot
building for the Holocaust
Museum's 600-plus pieces
(©wfcs)

And while He is showing Himself to both Christians and Jews through the WFCS Holocaust Museum, His Spirit continues to move in that small church in North Carolina that now puts miracles on display.

"We didn't always know what we were doing with the Holocaust Museum," says Word of Faith's founding co-pastor Sam Whaley. "We just knew God was inspiring us and leading us to do it. We didn't have any natural ability to do any of this work, and we didn't have any understanding of the broadness of what it would accomplish or all the places it would go. We just did it because we knew God was telling us to. We did it out of our love for the Jewish people and didn't realize anyone would ever really see it. But to the glory of God they have."

It's a demonstration of the God who will accomplish His purposes through willing vessels, even when those vessels don't have the capacity to see the full picture God does—as was the case with Abraham, Moses and Joseph, to name but a few individuals in Israel's history who took similar steps of faith.

"We're just so thankful God chose us to take part in it and show our hearts," Sam Whaley says, "and hopefully speak to the whole world about how God wants us to walk together with and honor the Jewish people."

Marcus Yoars is the editor of Charisma. He has visited Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., yet his time viewing the students' artwork at the WFCS Holocaust Museum left him equally as moved—and astounded at what the Holy Spirit can do through yielded vessels.

To see more artwork from the WFCS Holocaust Museum, visit