

Tiffany Smith, [tiffanysmith44@ymail.com](mailto:tiffanysmith44@ymail.com)

## Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State

My journey to becoming an educator has been shaped by my personal background and the diverse settings that I have lived and worked in. Growing up in a low-income neighborhood and attending underfunded schools taught me the value of education and inspired me to become a teacher. As I begin my career in education, I strive to work on my repertoire so that I may bring enriching instruction to my future students. I know I will not be able to bring my students to the experiences because of the impoverished area I will be teaching in. I have been a resident of diverse communities and witnessed the impact of social and economic inequality on students' learning experiences. My commitment to addressing these issues has led me to apply to participate in the Institute being hosted by the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State, where I hope to further improve my skills and knowledge to better serve my students.

Personal background plays a crucial role in shaping one's commitment to participating in an institute such as this. Growing up in a low-income family, with parents that had not gone to college, I was exposed to the significance of not pursuing higher education and continuous professional development from an early age. My parents were both struggling to find employment that would allow them to make ends meet. Likewise, growing up in an impoverished area and going to small schools taught me the value of an enriching education and inspired me to become a teacher that can bring enrichment to my students. As a child, I saw firsthand how education could be a pathway to success and a way out of poverty when my mother finally attended college and graduated with her medical assistant degree. My mother comes from a poverty-stricken family who, on average, do not obtain a high school diploma or GED. She realized that higher education was an important step in getting away from her history of poverty and getting her children away from it, too. I have seen that higher education is pivotal to a prosperous future as well. To attain success in higher education a student needs to have a robust education in high school. I want to be a part of that education. I have just begun my teaching journey and only have my student teaching and paraprofessional experiences to draw from for educational purposes. I do not want my lack of experience to be a detriment to my students' education. Therefore, I will enrich my knowledge base and in turn enrich their learning and knowledge bases.

I was not fortunate enough to have teachers who believed in me, nor did I have anyone to push me to reach my full potential. I am dedicated to becoming someone who will help students rise to their full potential and believe in them. My dedication and commitment to my students will hopefully leave a lasting impression on them that gives them the perseverance to work for their futures. I am committed to my students' education and ensuring it is diverse, enriching, and significant. I believe learning about the Holocaust and other difficult topics is important for student development. High school students are going through a transition from childhood to adulthood. They are beginning to explore their identity and who they ultimately want to be. Teaching students about prejudice, loved ones, identity, loss, innocence, fear, friendship, valor, faith and hope helps them learn about themselves and who they do and do not want to be. Educators are a significant part of a student's development. Our students spend more time

watching who we are as adults than they do their parents during the school year. It is imperative we demonstrate not only ethical, moral and respectable traits but also caring, noble, and compassionate traits as well. We are molding the next generation and consequently, the next leaders, teachers, parents, and politicians. I choose to mold students into future adults who are kind, virtuous, and benevolent. Learning about the Holocaust will be vital in this endeavor.

Participating in this specific institute can be a significant step towards professional development, particularly for educators. Teachers who are committed to their craft recognize the importance of continuous learning and improvement. Additionally, my experiences as a student have taught me the value of quality education, and I believe that participating in the institute will provide me with the tools to offer the same to my students. Currently I am a student teacher with an exceptional mentor. She took the initiative to learn about teaching the Holocaust down in Philadelphia and she teaches it to her students remarkably. I have fully taken over teaching her classes and consequently, I am teaching Holocaust literature. Another topic that I am teaching is Apartheid literature. I remember reading Diary of Anne Frank in high school and learning very little about the Holocaust. The way that my mentor has chosen to teach her students about the Holocaust has already begun changing students into respectable young adults. I have directly witnessed the positive change learning about the Holocaust can lead to. Students are holding each other accountable for transgressions against their peers. One student even wrote a full apology to my mentor and another instructor for asking prejudiced questions during a guest speaker's speech after his peers confronted him about his actions. My deficiency of knowledge regarding the Holocaust is glaringly obvious to me, but hopefully my students are receiving a valuable education from me. I am doing my very best to do this topic justice at present, but I would become confident in teaching this topic if I were to learn more about delivering it from the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State granted by the National Endowment for the Humanities Institute.

I have visited the beautiful Penn State campus a few times, though it has been quite some time since I have had the opportunity to visit. I was a military wife for 10 years while my husband was in the air force. He is now a veteran, but my time travel coast to coast with him exposed me to diverse settings, people, and experiences. I saw large schools with immense budgets taking students around the country and providing them with opportunities our small towns in Northeastern Pennsylvania only dream of. I heard stories from other military wives about what their high school experiences were like with thousands of classmates and a vast assortment of classes offered. I realized that my low-income school did not present me enriching opportunities or lessons. I know it would not have been possible for them to fund trips, guest speakers, and other experiences, but they could have ensured that we received enriching content from within the classroom. I wish to do this for my future students. I have been on a journey this past month relearning what I knew about the Holocaust and learning a whole lot more that had never been presented to me as a young adult.

I hope this Institute will support my teaching of the Holocaust and other difficult topics so that I may support impoverished students. My experience as a paraprofessional gave me support for assisting students who have individual educational plans, 504's, mental illness, and physical disabilities. I found that my past experiences in customer service have helped me discover ways to always have a smile and kind demeanor for even my most challenging students.

My time as a pharmacy technician in the emergency department prepared me for dealing with people who are experiencing heightened stress and emotions. I continuously seek tools, experiences, methods, and strategies that will support me while I support my students.

While participating in this institute I hope to explore more about the Holocaust. I currently have been exploring how survivors have shared their stories through art. Art is powerful. Seeing in color and through the eyes of another person leaves an impression. Reading words that were written day-to-day with no idea as to what the future was going to hold is jarring when you realize the person writing those words, that started out optimistic and hopeful, died in a gas chamber. Hearing a poem, written by a former Nazi supporter, describing the development of the Holocausts list of victims until the poet himself is a victim, opens eyes to the dangers of being complacent while others are abused.

Questions that I have that I would like to explore while participating in this Institute are many. Some of these questions are about the displaced people from the Holocaust. Where are they now? Are there stories about them finding their families? Do any of them move back into their homes from which they were evicted? How did they feel about their homeland once the atrocities ended?

I also have questions about the concentration camps. I have only ever heard of Auschwitz before I started teaching about the children's' art from Terezin. Where were the other camps? Were they scattered around or are they all localized to one area? Are any of them repurposed today? Why not tear them all down?

I would like to know what happened to the nazi's as well. Did they all survive the end of the war or did they become prisoners for their sins against humanity? Do people shun the descendants of the nazi's in other countries? Were they all evicted from Germany and the surrounding countries?

My last questions are about Germany. Do they teach students about the Holocaust over there or does everyone pretend it did not happen? Do they talk about Hitler? What about the other past leaders? Does Germany still have lasting prejudice against Jews and the other victimized groups?

My background and teaching contexts strongly relate to my commitment and ability to participate in the Institute. I am fully committed to my professional development as a result of my past experiences in low-income schools. Students should be provided with exceptional educational opportunities no matter the economic status of their community. As an educator it is important to ensure that I bring them these opportunities in any way I am able to. Participating in this Institute is one of the ways I can support my students' education.