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Students honor survivor-lecturer of Holocaust

Jennifer Pinner

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Carl Ofisher was 13 when Jewish students in Poland were banned from going to school. Then came the ghetto. The concentration camps. The death marches. It all came to an end when American soldiers freed Ofisher and others from a concentration camp in Austria at the end of World War II. He weighed 55 pounds and had little education at 19, having never attended high school.

But now, the 80-year-old Scottsdale resident will finally get a high school diploma.

The Tempe Union High School District's administration approved requests by Marcos de Niza High School students on Monday to give the longtime assembly speaker an honorary diploma.

"Usually you get (to) graduation when you're 18, not 80," Ofisher said. "I have many awards, but this is something different."

Ofisher is expected to receive the diploma at a school board meeting in mid-May.

It took two years, signatures of more than 400 students and numerous conversations with administrators.

"He gave us time and energy for 20 years and I thought this was the best way to give back for everything he gave for us," said Brandon Bohlman, 18, who in part championed the effort.

Ofisher, a member of the Phoenix Holocaust Survivors' Association, has spoken regularly about his harrowing experiences to students at the school since the mid-1980s.

He still bears the identification given to him by the Nazis — "B8047" — tattooed in bluish-green ink on his left forearm.

Ofisher's family — his parents, two brothers and two sisters — died during the Holocaust.

"It's very hard" to talk about, Ofisher said. "You come home and dream about (the experiences) and go through your childhood."

But thousands of letters from students over the years have spurred Ofisher to keep repeating his story.

"In the beginning, we didn't talk about the Holocaust. We wanted to forget everything because we lost 6 million of us," he said. "When we survivors started to pass away . . . we woke up and realized we needed to teach the Holocaust."

Peggie Peters, an advanced placement history teacher at the school who first invited Ofisher to speak at assemblies, said he has contributed to the education of students and "deserves to be a (Marcos de Niza) Padre." The Padre is the school's mascot.

The honorary diploma almost didn't happen, however.

Last year, a group of students tried to get the process moving but hit a dead end when they thought Ofisher didn't meet criteria to receive an honorary diploma.

Bohlman, who wasn't as involved in the process last year, said students mistakenly thought Ofisher had to be a person who missed out on his high school diploma because he was serving his country in a war.

Zita Johnson, a district school board member, said Bohlman approached her for advice in March on what he should do to obtain a diploma for Ofisher. She suggested talking with the school's principal who then brought it to the district superintendent who approved the diploma.

Principal Frank Mirizio and Bohlman will present the proposal later this month to the school board, who is expected to give final approval, Johnson said.

"He's a walking piece of history," Mirizio said.

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