To Bear Witness: Stories from Auschwitz to Cincinnati - Episode 1

transcript

**Jackie Congedo** 00:01

Auschwitz is a name the world can't forget. At the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center, we've made it part of our mission to understand its impact by learning from those who survived and came to Cincinnati. In this limited series, we share those stories of courage loss and the ripple effects still felt today.

Hi. I'm Jackie Congedo, and welcome to a special edition of the Upstander Ripple Effect where we are joined by the incredible Elizabeth Pierce, the President and CEO of the Cincinnati Museum Center, to talk a little bit about our collaboration between the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center and the Cincinnati museum center to bring the Auschwitz traveling exhibition called "Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away." here to Union Terminal in the fall of this year, an incredibly exciting opportunity for our community, and I think, a timely one as well. This is the largest collection of artifacts and documents outside of Auschwitz to ever be presented in North America, and it has only made a few stops in North America. So we really will be hosting this incredible exhibition for basically the totality of the Midwest coming in the fall.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 01:15

Yes,

**Jackie Congedo** 01:16

tell me a little bit about you know you were in these conversations before I was even a thing at HHC, before I had joined the team here. Talk bring me back to sort of when this first came across your desk, and why this was a real priority for you and your team at the museum center.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 01:33

So it was created in 2017/2018. It was at the Kansas City Union Station center in 2019 and we do a lot of benchmarking with that group there. They're also in a restored train station. They also have a large exhibition space and and I just knew that it was having a tremendous impact on that community. There were hundreds of, thousands of, people coming in the Greater Kansas City, Midwest area, there to see this exhibition. And so that's how it became on my radar screen. We, of course, were moving back into Union Terminal. Holocaust and Humanity Center was opening here at Union terminal at that time, and then we have COVID, so everything got shut down. So I've paid attention to it as it's been in different places, and talked to the curator and talked to partners who have had it, knowing that in the back of my mind, like that's something that needs to come to Cincinnati, and it clearly needs to be in this building for all the connections that you and I are going to talk about today.

**Jackie Congedo** 02:41

Yeah, so let's, let's talk a little bit more about that. I, one of the things I'm so excited about for this joint effort is, and really it's, I say, joint it's you and I and our teams and the organizations, but also a number of other players, World Heritage exhibitions, the Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum and Musealia, which is, you know, the curator of this exhibition, and a number of other thought leaders and scholars who came together to put this, this incredible learning, public learning experience together. What makes it so - what makes it so tough? Let's talk about how unique it is that it's going to be in this space that is, as you said, a train station. And we know, obviously, in the work that we do at HHC, the significance of trains and the history. And if you've ever been to HHC, or if you haven't come down before the Auschwitz exhibition, you can take a look and learn for yourself. But this, this concept of, you know, trains, of course, during the history that brought people to death, but also in this building, there

**Elizabeth Pierce** 03:41

brought people to their new lives.

**Jackie Congedo** 03:43

Yes, and this concept of rebuilding and local survivors and resilience and hope that I think is anchors us in our work. So, you know, we're going to get to tell this story in a place where the history, I always say, the global history, became local history. What does that you know, as you've been thinking about the power of that, what does that mean to you?

**Elizabeth Pierce** 04:04

Well, it just - we have this incredible moment and opportunity in this building to be able to bring these, these traveling exhibitions, to bring the world to Cincinnati. We've done that consistently over the last 20 years. We brought the Vatican exhibition, we brought the Cleopatra exhibition. We brought the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition, so Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away. being able to be a part of that body of work made so much sense. And, you know, I was jumping up and down with the exhibit producers who were like, Oh, we might take it to Chicago. We might send it to a bigger city. I said, "No, no, it has to come here. It has to come here because of the history of the building, and it also has to come here because Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust and Humanity Center has put the emphasis on humanity and the call to action of what one does as one has been presented with this information." So to be able to have your unique approach to wrap around and channel the emotion that will be generated as people bear witness to this is unique in every presentation that it's been around the globe. So Cincinnati gets to do something that nobody else has been able to do.

**Jackie Congedo** 05:18

Yeah, and I think you could tell you know, when the World Heritage team came and were sort of, they obviously know the museum center well, right with you all in another number of other exhibitions, but came to see, to see this space, to see the Holocaust and Humanity Center Museum, that was, I think, abundantly clear to them that, you know, we have this approach that, yes, is anchored in the gravity of the history, and you know the consequences of the history, but really, you know at its core, and this comes from our local survivors, right? It's not enough just to teach the history. We have to ask ourselves, "What does that ask of us today, and how can we actually use this as a foundation for inspiration? You know, we know what, what the worst of humanity looks like. It's really, actually not enough to say, let's not be the worst. Let's talk about what it looks like to be the good." So you know, I'm excited to see what we can do in partnership, which our teams are feverishly planning right now, to make sure that we can sort of use this experience as a sort of an alchemist, to bring people in in a way that is compelling and grounded in this, in the truth and the the historical facts of what happened, And then to sort of catalyze this spirit of upstanding to come out of it. So we're doing that in a couple of ways. The first things talk a little bit about, like, what's going to be different in this presentation. So the first thing is, we have the amazing fortune of sort of being the guardians of the local stories, people who came here with nothing and found the resilience in themselves to, you know, build new lives, to contribute to this community, to build this incredible institution, this museum. And so some of those stories are sort of people who survived Auschwitz, right? We're going to be able to actually integrate those local stories into the exhibition itself. So when you come through, if you've been to the one in Boston or, you know, it's in Toronto right now, you should still come again, because it will be a different experience.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 07:36

And even if you've gone to DC and seen the National Museum, this is going to be a unique a different experience than what you've seen there. There will be themes and threads that are similar. But to your point, we get to integrate some of the local stories into and be a part of this global exhibition,

**Jackie Congedo** 07:47

yeah, yeah. So we'll have, we'll have those local stories intertwined, and then we're going to, we're doing a lot of work on the sort of the before and the after aspects of this that you know, that the education and sort of resources that people will have access to before they come in and after they leave that are grounded in this call to be the best of humanity today. So you know the character strengths which help us understand our own capacity to be what we call upstanders. And how do we introduce people to that framework and give them some tools to do something with the feelings, as you said, these, I think, very consequential and heavy feelings that that people are going to have when they leave this exhibition. Let's talk about just the core of the exhibition itself. What kinds of things can people expect to see when they when they come in? You know, this is obviously billed as the largest collection of artifacts outside Auschwitz to ever be presented in North America. What kinds of things will people be able to experience and encounter?

**Elizabeth Pierce** 08:51

Well, I think the physicality of the camp will be presented in a way through concrete pillars and barbed wire and a barrack that they've been able to rebuild and travel. So you'll get a sense of kind of what it was like to be there. From that perspective. There are a number of art pieces that are going to help tell the story a little bit more, as well as artifacts from people who were at the camp. So you will see things that belong to people that were taken from them when they arrived. You will also see kind of stories of Auschwitz as a community prior to it being determined to be the death camp that it became. It was a thriving medieval community for 800 years before the Nazis showed up and decided to make it what we know it as now. And I think the reality that it sat on this transportation crossroad and this economic crossroad is why they chose it for this ultimate destiny. But you know, I think understanding that Auschwitz was a place unto itself, so you get a little sense of that and some some material culture from the community prior to the Nazis arriving.

**Jackie Congedo** 10:05

Yeah. And I think, I actually think that is so important, particularly for the times we're living in, because the more we again can sort of conceptualize this or put this in a place in our own minds that's long ago and far away, to use the branding of the exhibition, the less we can hold that this was something that human beings built, human beings participated in, you know, and

**Elizabeth Pierce** 10:31

that it was happening right over there.

**Jackie Congedo** 10:33

Yeah, exactly. This was a town with people who went home next door and tended their gardens and fed their families and then went back to work at the at the gas chambers, right? So we have to hold the weight and complexity of the fact that as people, we are capable of the best of humanity and the worst of humanity. And I think Auschwitz, Auschwitz has become this reminder of that for us, collectively as a society, as a human family, that you know what happened there? The worst, absolute worst of humanity happened there, perpetrated by everyday people and also the resilience, great stories, incredible stories of survival, of people who held hope amidst these incredibly horrific conditions and dehumanizing frameworks rescue. So we have, and we we have a lot of those stories in terms of local people who you know, who live them. So we're really excited to bring that to folks in Cincinnati, but also more regionally, right? How is this curated in a way that's that's accessible for people? Can you talk a little bit about, like, the experience of being in the exhibition? I think there's a lot of folks who might feel like, you know, I'm not sure that I have it in me

**Elizabeth Pierce** 12:00

Yes,

**Jackie Congedo** 12:00

given the weight of our world to go see this, what would you say to encourage folks that you know, this is something that is accessible, that's built to be consumed.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 12:10

You know, there it's built across a number of learning styles. So there will be an audio guide. There will be panels where you can read and take your time and work your way through things. There are large scale objects, like we talked about, and small scale objects. And so it'll flow. And you know, there's video throughout - some news footage of the day, and then family video that shows like life before and what was lost. And so it's going to be a range of content in a way that people can kind of consume and dip in and out. It's not so linear and chronological that you have to, like, you know, walk through it very meth in a very specific way. But, and, you know, and I've seen it now twice, and I've kind of meandered through and picked up different things at each time. And so I think it will be accessible to, to a high school audience, a college audience, an adult audience, you know, maybe junior high as it kind of tracks a little bit with, with how you guys bring students in as well. I didn't find it. It wasn't overly graphic and disturbing from that perspective. It's more just disturbing that you're standing in this space that is resonant of and so you know, then being able to intersperse that with the stories of the survivors that came from the videos that are there, and then to have our local stories added to it, I think will lift up that holding of hope and that that energy that that people use to spur their lives forward.

**Jackie Congedo** 13:55

Yeah, I know that, you know, in our survivor community, the the folks we've we work with, and you know who, who have history, family history tied to Auschwitz, are... excited is not the right word, I think, grateful. And see this as a real opportunity to infuse the story that really can be centered around dehumanization with with the sense of humanity, and not just humanity, local humanity. So you know, when you come into this exhibition, folks like Steve Coppel, whose father, Werner, was really at the foundations of building the Holocaust and Humanity Center, what is now HHC, arrived in this building with a wife, a baby, and a suitcase. And he always would say, "That started the second part of my life, or that ended the first part of my life," reflecting on sort of that, you know, these were two wildly. He was almost like he lived two different, two different experiences, experiences, existences. And so, you know. So people will have the power before they see any of the artifacts, or are sort of immersed in, you know, these pieces that that help them get a sense of what the camp was like. They will hear from Steve

**Elizabeth Pierce** 15:17

Right,

**Jackie Congedo** 15:17

that this history

**Elizabeth Pierce** 15:20

is my family history,

**Jackie Congedo** 15:21

is my family history. And it happened actually in this building right the my the rebirth, the new life, the new second chapter for my family.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 15:30

The number of people that I've already talked to about this that say, Oh my God, I've had chills like it. In their emotional core, they respond to it, yeah, just like I am right now.

**Jackie Congedo** 15:41

And that's, I think, that is the power of it. That's the power of it being told here. That's the power of being able to lift up these voices of survivors and their children, because, because, I think, you know, we have something really, we have a story that we should, we should be proud to tell here, which is about resilience and rebuilding and hope and new life, and the way this this community is a city embraced a group of people who were refugees, who were refugees.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 16:15

It's also interesting to put it in the broader context of the history of this community, over 200 plus years of waves of immigration coming here, right? So it's interesting to me to have the depth of Jewish history in Cincinnati, to also kind of be a part of that story, because we celebrated the bicentennial of Jewish Cincinnati several years ago, and so just to know that like this, is a place that has is rooted in culture, is rooted in this resilience of community building over many, many years. You know, one of the stories about this building during the World War Two is that it's the first USO, essentially in the country that gets established here, and it's staffed in this very ecumenical way by women of Protestant, Jewish and Catholic traditions coming here to help, like care for the soldiers as they are crisscrossing the country in and out of this train station. So the just this layer upon layer of Cincinnati that I think people are going to discover also, and this exhibition is going to create conversations for people to have. And you know, as people say, "Oh, I knew that person. Oh, I knew that family. I didn't know that part of that family history, but they've been a vibrant member of the community" is the example, is the resilience, is the thing that we want to be teaching the next generation, that we want to be reminding ourselves of right now as well. So, yeah, it's, it's layered and rich,

**Jackie Congedo** 17:54

yeah, yeah. I think that's well said. And you know the magic of museums is that the story is still, still isn't written, because the missing piece is the people come and experience it, and what happens as a result of, I mean, we know this in Kansas City and in other cities where this has been, you know, folks have shared that there was actually sort of a measurable, seismic difference in the way community cohesion and this

**Elizabeth Pierce** 18:27

uptick in relationships and understanding and, yeah, yeah,

**Jackie Congedo** 18:31

because, you know, there really is nothing like being confronted with the consequences of lack of that right, like unchecked hatred, division, dehumanizing forces, you know, these can lead to truly catastrophic things. So when we're you know, when the when the consequences of that are laid bare, and people can experience it, can experience it in a way that's grounded in the history, that's grounded in the personal, local narratives, and they have the space to sort of let it transform them and move them, and then we can tell them, Okay, well, guys, what does it look like to actually be the best of how do we do that? Let's take this and do something with it. I think that, you know, the rest of the story really has yet to be written. I'm really excited to see what happens as a result of this learning in this city. And certainly, you know, we're living in a moment you referenced this a little bit. You know, we have sort of rising forces of hatred, division, you know, polarized politics. The temperature feels like it's just really hot and high right now. Antisemitism, of course, is a part of that mix. I guess I would just ask you, like, if we're successful, what does it look like? Right? That's after this leaves.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 19:53

That is a great question that I think we are still maybe going to explore that, because we've been so focused on a lot. Logistics and the details, lighting and getting it all organized and all of that. But I do think, like what we've heard from other communities, as you said, are stronger relationships that come out of it, a greater awareness of people throughout I think Cincinnati does that pretty well, but there's always you know that that is a fire that needs to be fed on a regular basis. We need to keep encouraging that relationship, building that understanding, that breadth of humanity that we want to see. I also think maybe, as we see, I'd be curious to hear how teachers are going to embrace this exhibition, and then how that will spur their conversations in their classrooms forward. Because I think the fundamental thing that we are struggling with right now is a lack of productive dialog, and this exhibition gives us another moment in time to say, let's talk about the power of connection and the power of dialog and see where that takes us.

**Jackie Congedo** 21:02

Yeah, yeah. I - we're doing a lot of work right now to get ready for the, you know, teachers and students and what sort of craft that experience holistically, because certainly there will be the time they spend in the exhibition. We want to build a really comprehensive experience for teachers and students that will, you know, equip them with what they need to know about, you know, the human story, as you said, who Jews are? What is antisemitism? That helps them understand the gravity of the history through the exhibition that helps them learn a little bit more about the local stories. You know, through additional time in our space or with our speakers, and then on the back end that helps them connect to the character strengths and gives their students an actionable tool to say, great, you know, let's, let's talk about what this means for us today and how we can activate that. So it'll be interesting to see. But we already have a lot of interest from, you know, teachers and school districts saying this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to be able to bring my kids to see this. I get the feeling from teachers and schools that this is similar to being able to, you know, it's the same kind of excitement they would have if they could take their kids to DC to see, you know, the museum in Washington. So it's just an incredible gift to the community. I think your your leadership that has brought this here, and the partnership, the partners, make it happen. You know, I am really hopeful that it lives up to all of our expectations and more, and that, like I said, the magic of when the community can experience this, and what happens as a result of that, it's going to be really exciting. Is there anything else that that you would want to add? Or I would also ask, like, you've seen this exhibition a number of different times in other cities, are, are there like, moments that still stick with you from seeing like in the exhibition itself that have

**Elizabeth Pierce** 22:57

Yeah, well, you know, we talked a little bit about the fact that I had no walking in. I was I hadn't even thought about Auschwitz as a as a community right prior to its role at the camp. So I so that was one thing that really kind of did take my breath away a little bit. Oh, wait, Auschwitz was this thriving place. And so just the realization that it like something can so quickly be turned into something else.

**Jackie Congedo** 23:24

Yeah.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 23:25

So that very much stayed with me. You know, I think the survivor testimonies that show up in the exhibition are things that you can see here in your gallery. And so that was another resonant connection, yeah, as well. And understanding, like, just how to take some time and not rush through the exhibition, right? So museum people are the worst museum exhibit attendees. We walk through very quickly. Check, check, check, yeah, yeah, yeah. So just, you know, the notion of, like, just, you know, take a deep breath and soak in the information. And I think one of the things, one of the tickets that we're going to offer is the ability to kind of come and go and, you know, go through it and come back again and go through it another time. So the ability to take your time through and be able to process but, you know, I guess the other thing I would say is, like, we have a lot of pre time, so people should do - be curious about it. They should come here to your space and see this presentation and understand the local dynamic before the exhibition comes. And hopefully they will also do some additional research or read up on a number of things that will give them additional context around

**Jackie Congedo** 24:47

it. Yeah, yeah. I think there's a lot of opportunity for folks to sort of spend some time preparing.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 24:56

Yes.

**Jackie Congedo** 24:57

And to your point, I, um, the dwell time in the exhibition, as compared to other exhibitions, is pretty has been pretty long, right? So people,

**Elizabeth Pierce** 25:09

people want to take their time with the information,

**Jackie Congedo** 25:12

Right. Exactly. So, you know, being able to come and experience some of the stories beforehand to anchor yourself and sort of the core tenants of the history and the local layer of this beforehand, I think will be really helpful for people.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 25:26

There's also the Auschwitz State Birkenau Museum has a podcast called "On Auschwitz," and the curator from Poland leads that podcast. He's been a central part of the presentation as well. So that's another resource in addition to the material that you're putting out. So there are a variety of ways to kind of really get yourself grounded in and have a sense of what you're going to see, and then still be moved by seeing the objects and hearing the information.

**Jackie Congedo** 25:56

Yeah. And it's going to be, you know, this is a, this is a big operation for even, you know, the incredible, I would say, the wizards on your team at the museum center, you guys are going to be moving to seven days a week, timed ticketing. I mean, this is going to be a lot of people in other cities, we've seen up to 300,000 people.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 26:17

Oh, and I really, I'm hoping that we'll be able to engage local and regional communities to come. So the way to bring all these other places, they often come for other exhibitions. This is going to be similar in that regard. And I think it's a great opportunity for the broader region, because we know that there are survivor stories in Cleveland, in Columbus, in Louisville, in Indianapolis, right? This is a place where they can come. Visitors from those communities can organize themselves and

**Jackie Congedo** 26:49

our collective history,

**Elizabeth Pierce** 26:51

exactly, yeah, be able to really kind of pull in a number of different regional areas,

**Jackie Congedo** 26:55

yeah. So tickets are on sale, yes. And we would recommend that folks get their tickets in advance. You'll also see when you go to purchase a ticket, there's a special add on for HHC, which gives sort of additional context for the local history and also the connection for our world today and this humanity layer and up standard. And so you get a little discount if you get your Auschwitz ticket and you bundle it with the HHC ticket. So go online the museum center. Museum Center's website, get your tickets. Sign up for a time, because it's going to be it's going to be packed, right? And we're just really excited to bring this to the community, and so grateful for the partnership of our friends at the museum center for your your leadership, really, and being the driving force to bring this here. It's, you know, I speaking personally, and I know for our team, we feel like this is the kind of the opportunity of a lifetime to be able to share these stories on a on a really grand scale, and do it at a time when we all feel the weight of the world.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 28:03

It just makes perfect sense to be able to bring us here to the Cincinnati, but specifically to this building. Yeah, I think so.

**Jackie Congedo** 28:11

And as I said, what I said, the magic component is YOU so we can't wait to see what your takeaway is when, when you come see this, and how this changes us, changes us as a city and as a region for the better. Thank you so much for spending time with me today and onward.

**Elizabeth Pierce** 28:28

Here we go.

**Jackie Congedo** 28:29

This is a production of the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. The Center's mission is to ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust inspire action today. This series is part of the Cynthia and Harold Guttman Family Center for Storytelling. Special thanks to Julie and John Cohen for their support of this series. Visit us in person at historic Union Terminal in Cincinnati, Ohio, or online anytime at holocaustandhumanity.org. Managing producer is Anne Thompson. Technical producer is Robert Mills, and Technical Director is Josh Emerson. Additional video production by Michael holder. Visit Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away at Union Terminal, beginning in October 2025.