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'The Weight of Memory: I Am Bernie Furshpan' Shares Message Against Hate and Remembrance of The Past

THE WEIGHT OF MEMORY: **I AM BERNIE FURSHPAN**

A FILM BY CHRISTIANE ARBESU



For many Holocaust survivors, telling their story to younger generations was a difficult proposition, as doing so brought back so many traumatic memories.

As the son of a survivor, Bernie Furshpan was horrified to learn of his father's survival story. But Furshpan has used this pain as a source of inspiration. As a speaker for the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center for Nassau County, Furshpan regularly goes to schools and community groups to share the details of his father's personal history in order to educate people on the larger lessons of the Holocaust and the need to curb hatred.

Furshpan's mission has been put on full display in Christiane Arbesu's documentary film "The Weight of Memory: I Am Bernie Furshpan," which will be screened at the Avram Theater at Stony Brook Southampton's campus on Thursday, June 26, at 5 p.m.

The 80-minute film follows Furshpan as he visits schools and talks to students about his father's story, intercut with interviews of Furshpan.

Arbesu, who lives in Hampton Bays, first met Furshpan at the screening for another documentary. Later, she got an email from the center about Furshpan's mission of telling his father's story. She went to an event where he was speaking and was moved by what she heard.

"When I heard the story, I knew then and there that it was a story that I had to tell," she said. "He was so incredibly gifted at telling that story that it literally brought most people to their knees, and this was to a room of adults. It was so powerful and impactful the way he delivered it."

Furshpan's father, Moshe, lived in a small village in Poland, now located in Ukraine, with 1,500 other Jewish people. As the villagers heard disturbing rumblings of what was happening across Europe, they didn't believe it and stayed put.

As Nazi soldiers approached the village, a welcoming committee was sent out to greet them. The committee was executed on the spot. Moshe, who was 10 years-old at the time, escaped into the forest as the rest of his family was killed.

For the next three years, Furshpan's father hid in the forest, surviving off of tree bark, mushrooms and carcasses of dead rabbits and suffering through blistering cold winter temperatures. At night, he would sleep in a ditch and cover himself with leaves and branches to hide from Nazi soldiers who searched the forest with dogs that would sniff them out. Anybody found was executed on the spot.

Growing up, Furshpan found that his father was reluctant to share the details of his difficult story with him, as he was still pained by what he went through. Furshpan explained that this led to his own mother filling the role of a motherly-figure to his father.

"My father at age 10 was so traumatized so severely that my mother had to raise my dad," he said. "She made him the food that his mother made, she protected him like a cat protects her kittens."

It wasn't until Furshpan was a teenager in the 1980s that he learned the details about all that his father went through. He noted that during this time, more Holocaust survivors began opening up about their harrowing experiences.

"As films came, out museums started opening up. They thought they had to be a part of this or their stories were going to be lost," he said.

Years later, motivated by seeing a rise in antisemitism and witnessing how other second-generation survivors were coming forward, Furshpan decided that his father's story was one that needed to be told — especially to students — to encourage them to not give in to hate.

"The point is that most of society remains silent [against hate] and that's the reason why we

educate young people to stand up, not just about what happened so that these stories are not forgotten, but also for their generation to make a difference,” he said.

When talking to students, Furshpan usually starts with “shocking them into reality” and delving into his father’s story. The level of detail varies depending on the age of the students, but for high school students, he bluntly talks about the horrors his father saw.

One of the main points he emphasizes when talking to students is to not take anything for granted with their families, noting that “it was all taken away from my father in a fraction of a second when the Nazis entered the village.”

But there’s an uplifting message in Furshpan’s talks as well, as he encourages students to look past their differences with one another and see a bigger picture of humanity, which he calls “Sanity in Humanity,” a mantra that came out of making the film.

“Hatred has become normalized and the goal of Sanity in Humanity is to wake people up out of this unconsciousness,” he said. “We’re bombarded with negative news that we’ve become numb to it and we have to wake up.”

The talks have been received well by students, as they are moved by Furshpan’s father’s story, but also feel motivated at the same time.

“He’s such a powerful storyteller, he manages to get these horrible facts across but he does it in such a gentle way where people are really open to hearing it,” said Arbesu. “He doesn’t preach, it’s so infused with love and tenderness.”

One of the film’s most powerful moments comes when Arbesu asked Furshpan if he had ever seen his father cry. This thought-provoking question made Furshpan emotional and it still resonates heavily with Arbesu.

“To see him cry still gets me because you could see just how much he loved his father and how much of his father is part of Bernie,” she said. “And one of the big lessons from the Holocaust is that you never take anything for granted.”

Seeing the students interact with Furshpan made Arbesu feel “excited and hopeful” as they learned about lessons of the past.

“When you see these kids that are really paying attention and wanting to learn, it gave me a lot of hope that this generation, which is our future, might look at things a little bit differently and realize we need to have compassion,” she said.

At previous screenings of the film, Furshpan said that “99 percent of people are crying throughout the whole thing and are moved.” He credited Arbesu for “piecing it together so beautifully, there’s no way you can’t leave without feeling something.”

“The Weight of Memory: I Am Bernie Furshpan” is screening at the Avram Theater at Stony Brook Southampton on Thursday, June 26, at 5 p.m. Tickets are \$20 and are available online or at the door. Avram Theater at Stony Brook Southampton is at 39 Tuckahoe Road in Southampton.