

Javier Galindo:

The Student Who Made My Semester

The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey is not the most famous college, but it is a unique academic institution where you feel at home from the first second you enter the campus.

During the 2011 Spring Semester, I was invited to be the “Ida E. King Distinguished Visiting Scholar in Holocaust Studies” at the college. Some of my colleagues from Israel had taught at Stockton, and they told me a lot about the program in Holocaust and Genocide Studies there. But for me, it was my first time teaching in the USA.

Most students who go to Stockton College come from the lower middle class. Many of their families cannot afford to pay their tuition, so many students have to work, as only some of them are fortunate enough to get scholarships. The students are all ages: students who have just finished high school; teachers who have been in the classroom for a few years; and army veterans who have completed their service or are in the active reserves. Others are people who have lost their jobs and are trying to prepare for second or third careers.

It is still a riddle to me as to why so many of them are interested in the Holocaust and in Genocide Studies – not many of Stockton’s more than 7,000 students are Jewish – but during the semester I was there, twelve undergraduate classes and four graduate seminars in Holocaust and Genocide Studies were filled to capacity. In my undergraduate class, I had twenty-eight students, younger and older. Most took the course because they needed one more class to finish their degrees – in a variety of subjects from business studies to marine biology. Not many of them had studied history, so for most of them the whole issue of genocide was new. Most of them knew very little about American history – and almost nothing about European history. It is a very poor starting point from which to begin studying a subject like the Holocaust, or any other genocide for that matter. In addition, the students’ reading habits were very poor, so I decided to give them print-outs of all the articles they were to read for my class.

It was not long before the students were all so involved, so interested and so attentive that I felt I had to lead them not only to better knowledge about our topic of study, but also drive them to be more involved in what is happening in our world.

This is the context within which I want to tell you about Javier, an older student who arrived in my Holocaust and Genocide Studies class after having served nine years in the US military, including service in Iraq. Javier always came to class well dressed. He was never late, never missed a class (which met twice a week in the early afternoon), and he always hurried to work immediately after class.

Javier was quiet, attentive, and serious. From time to time, he raised his hand and asked a question. His questions were always so accurate and sharp, and he gave me the feeling that he was totally taken by the issues we were studying. For Javier, the most disturbing issue was the attitude of governments, peoples, and communities towards the atrocities committed by the Nazis. It was their “bystanding” and attitude of indifference that disturbed him the most.

One Sunday during the semester, I took my students to visit The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. Students could bring another person with them, if they wanted to. Javier brought his mother, a nice lady who works as an aid in a nursing home. She was very excited and moved by the opportunity to join us. She had never been to Washington D.C., much less to the Holocaust Memorial Museum.

After about three hours in the museum, going through the exhibitions, viewing the photographs, reading the commentary, the students began to exit the museum and approached me with many questions. Everyone was very moved by what they had seen, read, and heard. Javier and his mother were among the last to leave the museum building. His face was very sad and pale. He spoke to his mother in Spanish, trying to fill gaps in her knowledge.

On the bus, he asked me many questions about almost everything concerning the human suffering he had seen in the photographs, the human atrocities he had witnessed in the film footage, and the nature of human beings.

Our last class of the semester was a summary of the course. Almost all of the students expressed their feelings about the subject we had been studying all semester, about the course, and about my teaching. Some of them even promised to be more active in human rights organizations, or more faithful and attentive to listening to the news on TV. Javier, however, was quiet. I turned to him and asked him, as a more mature young man, an army veteran, to share his thoughts with us.

He waited a few seconds, and then he began a speech I shall never forget. He told us about the human experience he had had in Iraq. He spoke about the dehumanization he had experienced, and he kept asking why the USA could not have been more involved in preventing atrocities in our world, starting with the Armenian genocide at the beginning of the twentieth century, then going through the Holocaust, Rwanda, former Yugoslavia, up to the more recent atrocities in Darfur. He was outraged at the inaction of the USA, even desperate, and I could not help thinking that he had taken the blame upon himself. But I was mistaken. It was not “blame” that Javier had taken upon himself. It was “responsibility.”

Javier told us that he would graduate with a degree in Social Work. He intends to work among people who need help and compassion, starting with a few, a small circle of people, and then, hopefully, expanding into larger circles.

Chapeau, Javier! I take my hat off to you! You have made me a very proud teacher. You proved to me that teaching can make a difference.

My late father used to say: “Where there are no human beings, be a human being!” I believe my father was thinking about people like Javier.

Nili Keren, a well-known teacher and scholar who lives in Israel, is active in many human rights organizations, including those promoting better relations between Palestinians and Israelis, Muslims and Jews. During the Spring 2011 semester, Dr. Keren was the “Ida E. King Distinguished Visiting Scholar in Holocaust Studies” at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey (USA).