

# Holocaust survivor

## LAUREEN NUSSBAUM SPEAKS ON UPCOMING PLAY

PHOTO AND STORY BY JASON SISSON  
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Laureen Nussbaum, a Holocaust survivor and childhood friend of Anne Frank, visited Clackamas Community College over spring break for a Q&A.

The event was arranged by theater instructor Jim Eikrem in advance of the department's spring play "And Then They Came for Me: Remembering the World of Anne Frank," which will open May 23 and run through June 2.

Eikrem arranging for Nussbaum, his former German professor at Portland State University, to come to campus in conjunction with the play was the result of good timing.

"When I knew we were considering this play I immediately thought of Laureen Nussbaum. I started to do a little bit of research online to see if she was even still alive," Eikrem said. "She's 92 years old."

Eikrem soon found an interview Nussbaum did in Seattle last year — alive no doubt — and was able to get in touch with her through the world languages department at PSU.

"It was really serendipitous, the fact that she was down here and available. That's why she ended up down here

on spring break," Eikrem said.

Julie Akers, a theater faculty member, is at the director's helm in Eikrem's stead while he is on sabbatical for spring term. Eikrem spoke about this decision and the formation of the forthcoming play, which intersperses interviews with two Holocaust survivors and friends of Anne Frank between live actors recreating scenes from their lives.

"I was looking for a sabbatical replacement and she [Julie Akers] suggested this play. She said, 'I've done this in the past.' She has a self-proclaimed mission of trying to get all the high schools in Oregon, or at least the Portland area, to either see it or do it," Eikrem said. "And so, when she mentioned this I thought — I just jumped on it. I thought this would be a great thing to do."

Akers confirmed as much while also touting the importance of a bill requiring Holocaust education that is currently in the Oregon legislature.

"And now that I mention this thing about the Senate approving this [Senate Bill 664] — take this play

to every high school and let it be a part of their curriculum," Akers said. "That's my goal. Education, education, education."

Nussbaum arrived on the dimly lit set and sat with Eikrem and Akers to field questions from the pair, speaking mainly on her family's story and their relationship with the Frank family. She spoke specifically of being closer to Margot, Anne's older sister, while referring humorously to Anne as a "chatterbox." Nussbaum also reminisced fondly of putting on a play of her own with the Frank children.

"[The play was] called the Princess with the Nose," Nussbaum said. "I was stage director and Anne was the princess."

After this and some other more somber-toned questions for Nussbaum, the forum was opened to the audience. Nussbaum worked diligently through attendees' questions — the 92-year-old displaying a slight lack of hearing but no shortage of liveliness.

The inquiries varied in subject — from German propaganda to a

more innocuous question about how Nussbaum's day was going — but seemed to coalesce around one issue: how to best learn from the past to prevent the same type of atrocities from repeating. On this topic, though, Nussbaum made it clear that she's felt disappointed in the decades since the Holocaust; she expressed dismay that genocide continues today and with how history is taught.

"The way we learn history, our country is always the good guys and the other guys are always the bad guys... The Cold War, I'm sure, was very different from the Soviet Russia side," Nussbaum said. "As long as we learn these things myopically, I'm afraid genocide will progress."

An aphoristic truth seemed to linger behind much of the discussions — that those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Some in attendance spoke of parallels between what allowed the Holocaust to happen and present day, both in the U.S. and around the world. Nussbaum herself touched on the topic several times while also taking aim at American exceptionalism, stating that a similar attitude was common in Nazi Germany. In response to one audience member's question of what an average person can do to fight the injustices they perceive today, Nussbaum stated that open-mindedness is first, while also advocating for speaking up against those injustices and understanding adversaries.

"Cognizance of what your adversary thinks. Try to find common ground. Don't just write them off," Nussbaum said. "Because they don't just disappear if you write them off."

In a polarized political environment where many view those on the opposite end of the political spectrum as their enemies, it seems Nussbaum's advice may be especially pertinent. Indeed, if there is an antidote to the poisons of the past and present it may well lie in education — but also in understanding those we position ourselves against.



Julie Akers, left, and Jim Eikrem interview Laureen Nussbaum about genocide, politics and her life on March 25 at a public event in the Niemeyer Center.