

Black-American Educator Testifies to Holocaust Horrors

By Craig McGuire
 Sharing his personal experiences of the Holocaust and racism, highly acclaimed African-American educator Dr. Leon Bass captivated an audience in Brooklyn Heights, describing his inspiring personal struggles and triumphs.

Bass spoke at the Brooklyn Friends School and Friends Seminary, 375 Pearl Street, which was hosting their second annual Jerome Evans Holocaust Commemoration, "Witness to the Holocaust."

As a United States Army Corporal in the all-black 183rd Engineers Combat Battalion, Bass witnessed the horrors of Hitler's death camps after Germany's defeat in April, 1945.

"As we witness ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, neo-Nazism in Germany, and racial unrest here at home, the need to hear Dr. Bass's message becomes urgent," said James Handlin, head

of school at Brooklyn Friends, in a written statement. "The enormity of the Holocaust offers an invaluable educational tool. We must teach our youth to be neither perpetrators nor bystanders in the face of racism. In a time of worldwide unrest, we are committed to exposing xenophobia and replacing it with tolerance for all humanity."

"The Holocaust, racism, and anti-Semitism impacted on me at a very young age," said Bass, who in 1943, fresh out of high school, enlisted in the Army. "That decision brought me face to face with institutional racism, for at the time, our country practiced and promulgated racism, especially in the segregated Armed Forces," noted Bass.

"I remember asking myself, 'What are you doing here? What are you fighting for?'" reflected Bass, "when they said I wasn't good enough to get a seat

on the bus or a meal in a diner?"

When Germany surrendered, the 183rd was part of the force that liberated the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald.

"In all of my training, no one ever prepared me for what I was about to see and I will never forget that

April morning in 1945," remembered Bass.

The audience's attention remained fixated upon Bass as he graphically described many of the atrocities he witnessed at Buchenwald.

"When I left, I realized I was not the same. Something had happened to me," said Bass. "I had come in



Photos by Craig McGuire

The reception at the Brooklyn Friends School for the "Witness to the Holocaust" presentation, included traditional Jewish music played by Klezmer virtuoso, Yale Strom.

an angry young black man, and when I left I understood that suffering was not relegated to me and mine, but can touch all of us."

After years of living silently with his memories of

the Holocaust, Bass was prompted to speak out during his tenure as the first African-American principal in the Philadelphia school system.

With his powerful experience compounded with his 30 years as an educator, Bass carries his powerful message around the United States and Canada, moving audiences in locales ranging from maximum security prisons to universities.

"We have to fight the evil of racism," urged Bass. "I didn't come here to plant a rose garden, I came here with the truth."

Bass has received extensive recognition and numerous humanitarian awards for his work as an advocate of tolerance, including the *Yom Hashoah* Award for his contribution as a humanitarian, educator and liberator; the American Jewish Congress Communication Award for "Communicating the Lessons of the Holocaust to the Children of Philadelphia," and the Jesse Jackson Award from Operation Push.

Quoting the late James Baldwin, Bass concluded,

"Either we love one another, either we hold one another, or the sea will engulf us and the light will go out."



Acclaimed African American educator Dr. Leon Bass relates his experiences with the Holocaust and racism.

**THE PARK SLOPE
 DAY CAMP**