

Portraits of Pain



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'Anne Frank' cast connects with Holocaust Survivor's art

A hush falls over theater and journalism students as the doors open to University of Nebraska at Omaha's Samuel Bak Museum: The Learning Center. Footsteps soft, students pick up clipboards and paper and take a seat facing oil paint depictions of pears, candles, and crumbling marble. From a drop-down screen, a video begins, narrating the story of a Jewish child who found hope in painting amid a Holocaust that claimed more than 6 million Jewish lives.

Samuel Bak escaped a forced labor camp when his father stuffed him in a sack of sawdust and dropped him out of a second-story window. The 10-year-old had hidden for days under a bed while Nazis murdered every child under the age of 14. His father died in the camp.

Now, the 92-year-old Holocaust survivor raises conversation about brutality, loss, and reconstruction with surrealist paintings, 512 of which Bak donated to UNO in 2019, according to Director of Education Kati Larson.

The journalism and drama departments traveled to UNO for Samuel Bak exhibitions "Suspended in Time: Still Lives and Magic Realism" in December and "Justice and Hope" in February.

Journalism students snapped photos, interviewed other attendees and wrote reviews of art pieces for publication on PLSouthside Scroll. Theater tech students searched for inspiration in the visual elements of the art, and actors reflected on their characters in upcoming productions, primarily "The Diary of Anne Frank."

Canvas to Curtains

"I think it makes it real-world," drama teacher **Ms. Mary Dickson** said. "Although people know about Anne Frank and know about the Holocaust, I think it's easy for kids to look at it like a script, like a story. But when you go to these experiences, you realize that these were real people that lived these real things."

"The Diary of Anne Frank" begins in 1942 — the same year that 9-year-old

Bak had his first exhibition in a Jewish ghetto in Nazi-occupied Poland. As cast members walked around the gallery, they noted how Bak's emotions and experiences related to the characters they played.

Senior **Sophie Spence**, who played Anne's sister Margot Frank, noticed a theme of silenced voices in Bak's art and connected it to research she had done on her character.

"Margot, she actually had a diary, too, but it was lost," Spence said. "I think she would be happy that someone was able to tell a story just like hers, since she wasn't able to. She died so young."

In addition to silent reflection, chief curator **Alexandra Cardon** led students in discussions, which Cardon said was Bak's main goal.

"He was hoping to bring to this area of the country a space for conversation," Cardon said in an interview with journalism student **Kyleigh Hughes**, who attended the museum with the magazine staff.

"We've had very difficult conversations within this museum

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space about ... definitions of genocide, about discrimination, about cycles of hate."

One conversation centered on a series of paintings titled H.O.P.E., which contained the letters of "hope" broken, reconstructed and hidden in different landscapes. After silently observing each painting, students discussed what hope meant to them.

"What I've known before this is just our script, and being able to analyze it and read through it multiple times, it gives me a depletion of hope," said **Gavin Turecek**, a junior who plays Mr. Van Daan, a business associate of Anne's father who hid in the annex with the Frank family. "But seeing this now ... during that time, outside of the annex, whether it was in ghettos or whether it was in convents, like Samuel Bak was, there was this sense of hope; through art, through literature, through anything that people found, even through food."

Not Just History

Senior **Ava Winkler** felt particularly connected to the exhibit as a Jewish descendant of a Holocaust survivor.

The actor of instrumental helper Miep Gies and the understudy for Mrs. Frank, Winkler said Bak's art reminded her of a moment watching the televised 2024 presidential inauguration with her grandma, when Elon Musk gave what appeared to be a Nazi salute.

"My savta, my grandma, was the daughter of a Holocaust survivor," Winkler said. "In this last election, and after the inauguration, after Elon Musk ... My grandma, who prided herself on being so composed — I have never watched a grown woman cry like I watched her cry."

"I watched her, and oh, it was terrifying. It was just, 'we have to leave, we have to leave, we have to leave,' and it was just over and over and over again. ... She had not seen the Nazi salute since her and her dad left."

Winkler said she had never been very politically active, but that moment changed her. After the

inauguration, Winkler began to watch the news, teach her classmates about antisemitism in school projects, and call out hate.

She also started to wear her Star of David necklace for the first time "in a really long time." The necklace sat on her neck as she walked around the exhibit, observing the same star in painted depictions of genocide.

"Education is so important. It really is," Winkler said. "I wish we could have taken more people to this ... if we could have taken the whole school, it would have been perfect."

When students returned to the bus, they spoke quieter than they had on the way there. Ms. Dickson gathered papers. The reflections on those papers were used in the following weeks to change how students played their roles — from acting out fictional characters to connecting with real people killed by the Holocaust.

picture of Ava's necklace

"There is this weight you feel just being alive, because it is something to be so grateful for, to know that your family members made it out."

Ava Winkler, 12th

