



Jonathan Vaughn (from left) visits with VAMPY alumna Andi Dahmer and Denis Hodzic during a reception celebrating the first exhibit of murals created by VAMPY students enrolled in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust October 30 at the Kentucky Museum. Jonathan was previously a teaching assistant for the class and also helped prepare the murals to be exhibited.

# Never Again

## Holocaust Murals Go on Tour

More than 20 years of learning have produced a powerful collection of murals that were displayed at WKU in the fall and will go on tour this spring.

Since the mid-1990s, students enrolled in the Nazi Germany and the Holocaust class of the Summer Program for Verbally and Mathematically Precocious Youth (VAMPY) have been making the murals which depict scenes from the Holocaust.

Ron Skillern has taught the class since 1992 and has hoped to put the murals on exhibit nearly as long. "It's been something

that has been in our mind," he recounted. "Dr. Julia and I have talked about how they're so powerful that it would be really neat to see them on exhibit somewhere."

That dream came to fruition, thanks to a grant from the Jewish Heritage Fund for Excellence to curate a traveling exhibit. The exhibit was displayed at the Kentucky Museum on WKU's campus October 27 – November 5 and will next be displayed in Louisville.

Jewish Heritage Fund for Excellence Executive Director Jeff Polson spoke at a reception celebrating the exhibit on October 30. "It is a testament to a lasting message that we cannot forget," he said of the mural collection. "This exhibit is an important link in a growing chain of activities that will continue to focus our memories on this terrible period."

WKU President Gary Ransdell also spoke at the reception and expressed his



pleasure at what VAMPY students are able to accomplish. “This is the kind of thing that we’re fortunate to be able to do with highly gifted and talented junior and senior high school students in such a profound way,” he remarked. “I’m proud to be part of a university that not only does this, but keeps it and puts it on display for everyone to see.”

For Ron, the exhibit was an opportunity to look back at many years of VAMPY teaching. He saw much more than just the murals themselves when walking through the exhibit. “For me it’s the experience of actually making it,” he explained. “I see the discussions that go into making it. I see the kids that are now (some of them) well into their thirties who worked on this.”

One of those students was Andi Dahmer (SCATS 2009; VAMPY 2010-13), who took the class in 2010. She is now a freshman in the WKU Honors College and attended the exhibit reception. “Seeing them all in one place, it’s just indescribable,” she asserted. “It shows that different classes interpreted different things and took different things from the VAMPY experience, even though a lot of times we watched the same movies or we had similar class discussions.”

When displayed together, the murals make an impressive impact, said Julia Roberts, Executive Director of The Center for Gifted Studies. “Hosting an exhibit of murals produced in this class is a tribute to Ron Skillern as the teacher as well as to the students who have learned under his tutelage,” she said. “This mural exhibit is artistic as well as haunting in its messages.”

The murals are accompanied by informational signage to educate viewers about the symbols and events depicted. Ethan Holaday (SCATS 2008-09; VAMPY 2010-11), Ron’s teaching assistant in 2014 and 2015, researched the information.

The 18 murals will be added to this summer during VAMPY and will continue traveling to a variety of venues in the coming years.



Gary Ransdell (from left), Ron Skillern, Julia Roberts, and Dick Roberts

## Ron Skillern Honored for Volunteerism

Ron Skillern was recognized as The Center for Gifted Studies’ volunteer of the year during the 2015 Summit Awards ceremony held as part of WKU’s homecoming week.

Ron has taught Nazi Germany and the Holocaust during the Summer Program for Verbally and Mathematically Precocious Youth (VAMPY) since 1992, and his students have looked to him as a mentor and a role model long after they left his classroom. In addition to teaching, he helps distribute textbooks all over campus ahead of the Advanced Placement Summer Institute every summer.

Teaching and volunteering with The Center has been a rewarding experience, Ron revealed. “To be able to be part of something that’s much bigger than yourself, that’s much bigger than any one program, is just neat,” he said. “In education a lot of times, we talk, but we don’t do anything. The Center does stuff, and that’s very attractive to me.”

Over the last year, Ron put in countless hours to plan, design, and build an exhibit of murals created by his VAMPY class. With help from students at Bowling Green High School (where he teaches social studies) and fellow teacher Jonathan Vaughn, he built an impressive display system to present the murals. “I felt at times like I had enough wood to frame a house,” Ron quipped.

Ron was a clear choice to be the 2015 volunteer of the year, The Center’s Executive Director Julia Roberts explained. “Ron Skillern has been a faithful volunteer for The Center, helping in many ways over many years,” she said. “He can be counted on to move hundreds of books for the Advanced Placement Institute from building to building – a huge task. He conceptualized the exhibit frames for the murals and built them all with the help of students.”

“What I admire most in Ron is his willingness to help us at The Center no matter what the need is,” she concluded.