

## Profile: Roger Brooks

**By: Jeremy Kuperberg**



*Roger Brooks, President and CEO of Facing History and Ourselves*

Roger Brooks is many things: educator, researcher, administrator, and advocate. Unlike most academics associated with the Holocaust Educational Foundation, however, Brooks doesn't consider himself a Holocaust scholar. Prior to his current job as President of *Facing History and Ourselves*, Dr. Brooks was a scholar of ancient Jewish taxation and welfare at Notre Dame University and Connecticut College, where he served as Elie Wiesel Chair in Jewish Studies. For instructors at smaller colleges, he explains, "If you teach Jewish Studies broadly, then you have to be able to teach courses on the Holocaust." This responsibility to fill an institutional gap in Holocaust instruction is what brought Brooks to HEF over thirty years ago.

As a young professor at Notre Dame in the 1980s, HEF founder Zev Weiss approached Brooks and a colleague to encourage them to teach the university's first course on the history of the Holocaust. "We said we were interested but we were unprepared to teach that course," Brooks recalls, "and so HEF sent us on what was, in fact, one of its earliest study trips. And it was a study trip with only two of us!" After spending a month at Yad Vashem and touring Poland to visit Warsaw and Auschwitz, Brooks says he had an "a-ha" moment regarding his relationship to Holocaust Education: "Yep, this is work I have to do." Since that first small study trip, Brooks has been involved in "a little bit of everything" under HEF's purview: multiple Lessons and Legacies Conferences, two more study trips, and, most centrally, he has taught at over twenty sessions of the Summer Institute on the Holocaust and Jewish Civilization.

Brooks used his own unconventional path to Holocaust education to enhance HEF programming from the very beginning. On one of his HEF study trips, he recalls, "A group of us sat up at night and planned the first Summer Institute. Even at that time, I insisted that the

work of the Summer Institute couldn't just be history. It had to include great history, it had to include religion, and film, and literature. And indeed it always has." At nearly every Summer Institute since, Brooks has taught sessions on Judaism as a religion alongside these other topics. This well-rounded approach to Holocaust education is vital in Brooks' perspective, not only for learners but for instructors as well. During that first planning session, Brooks "insisted that it's not possible to teach a course on the Holocaust if you don't know more about the Jews than just that history. You need to know something about them as a religious group."

Brooks' integrative vision for history education has culminated with his current role as a leader in the educational non-profit sector. He left the academy to join *Facing History and Ourselves* largely due to the impact he could make. At the time of his interview there, Brooks recalls that the organization worked with 38,000 teachers: "We know that every teacher, on average, teaches 100 students a year. So one member of the search committee, he said, 'Well Roger, I've got 3.8 million reasons you should leave. The impact you have, even as the Provost...at a small liberal arts college is a couple thousand students.' So that was a pretty interesting moment for me."

Today, the organization works with over 100,000 high school teachers to promote professional development and classroom curricula tying historical instances of hatred and bigotry to current and future issues of ethics and social justice. While *Facing History and Ourselves* began as an organization that promoted Holocaust education in high schools, it now incorporates other instances of religious and racial intolerance. But Brooks cautions against focusing solely on the "Facing History" portion of his organization's title: "Our name is actually four words, not two...You study the Holocaust partly because it's a vital history that we need to know. But it's a vital history we need to know because you're likely to be in a situation in your life where the dehumanization that you studied is going to happen. The best way to prepare for that as a young person is to have looked back in the past and seen the choices that people made, and what their consequences were, so that you can make better choices." By bringing lessons about the Holocaust, American slavery, and present-day white nationalism into the lives of adolescents, Brooks hopes to train a generation of students to stand up against bigotry and victimization in 21st-century society.