

# 49-Year Educator Says Knowledge of Holocaust/Liberal Arts Is Slipping Away

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Stony Brook resident Steven Klipstein may be retired from his college post, but it seems hard to stop him from teaching.

Klipstein spent one year shy of five decades at Suffolk County Community College, where he taught in the English department, though he is much more widely known for his course on the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany during World War II.

He talks with a soft urgency about his passions, whether it's teaching, his time as adviser to the college newspaper, or his work with the college's Holocaust center, which is now called the Center for Social Justice and Human Understanding. For those students who knew him, that demeanor bled into his lectures, especially in the Holocaust class. He has taught that course for well over 30 years, and even now after he is a professor emeritus at SCCC, he still tries to teach young people about the massacre of over 6 million Jews.

And as people of the Jewish faith reach the end of Hanukkah this year and looking back to last year where New York was the site of multiple anti-Semitic attacks at the end of the Jewish holiday, such understanding becomes ever more important.

"At least New York mandates a day in high school, a mention of the Holocaust, so at least most New York kids know that it happened," he said. "But most of the country doesn't, so they have no idea what it is."

It's because the point Klipstein makes is while too many people see the Holocaust as a distant event, a pothole in the historical timeline, the reality is that it was not some kind of aberration, but the culmination of years of anti-Semitism both in Europe and in America. The U.S., while touting its role in defeating the Third Reich, was also the home to much of the time's leading anti-Semites, such as Henry Ford, who in 1938 received the Grand Cross of the German Eagle, the highest medal Nazi Germany could bestow on a foreigner.

But even closer to home, Long Island was one of the few places to have a real Nazi element in its backyard. In 1935, Camp Siegfried, a Nazi youth camp, opened in Yaphank. Though back then it may have seemed more like a camp to celebrate German heritage, even with the young men in brown shirts marching down roads named Hitler Street with arms outstretched in the classic Nazi salute. Klipstein talked about that camp, among other topics, in a recent six-

hour American Heroes Channel documentary, "Hitler's Empire."

Although it is common knowledge today, Klipstein said it took decades for a common understanding of those events to take root, both in Germany and in the U.S. But now, he said, he's seeing some of that understanding slip away.

Though occasionally he received critical glances from students about some point in his lectures, he has never encountered a Holocaust denier in his academic history. Still they are out there. The professor emeritus cited a tale told by Ruth Minsky Senderowicz, a Holocaust survivor from Commack, who has said a denier called to get her to say her story — of her mother being taken from her at the Lodz Ghetto in Poland and the daughter being sent to Auschwitz — was a lie.

"It takes a lot of courage to fight them, because they're not really scholars, they're provocateurs," Klipstein said.

Though the issue is now in getting more students to volunteer to learn about those horrific events. He continues to teach the Holocaust class, but said his lecture is down to small numbers. He stressed how important it is for people to not only learn about those days in the death camps but come to see the world differently through that understanding.

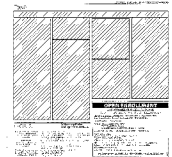
"I think for a lot of students, it's eye opening," he said. "And if you're in tune to it, you learn and you will think about it in different philosophical terms than what you've been thinking before about the nature of the world and humanity — the Holocaust can can't help but make you face those realities."

## Legacy at SCCC

The venerable educator got started at 25 years old, back when academia was coming into its own in Suffolk. Stony Brook University was growing at a rapid rate, and places like SCCC were attracting new blood into its ranks. Klipstein had a good interview and "got lucky," and was hired on the spot.

That hire would come to bite a few campus administrators in the proverbial butts later down the line. Years later, when he was assistant head of the English department, effectively also the head of the college's journalism department, he said the campus newspaper, The Compass, was "moribund," effectively on the brink of death. He came in after there was a reported brawl inside the paper's office.

"I told the other administrators that some-



thing’s got to be done, and they said, ‘Well, OK, do it,’” Klipstein said.

Cutting out the rougher parts of the staff, and just with two or three young people, he revitalized the paper. With the help of new editorial staff, they were putting out a good-sized, 20-page campus newspaper that won awards from the likes of Newsday. The paper also did not shy from getting involved in campus controversy. They went after administrators for nepotism in hiring family members for dead-end jobs or highlighting discrepancies with the college budget.

“It was really kind of enervating and exciting being the troublemakers on campus,” he said. “And we embarrassed them more than once, you know, which I confess that I loved.”

While administration couldn’t fire Klipstein as a tenured professor, he said it would regularly threaten his position as adviser to the paper. He would hold that position at the paper for 13 years.

Of his near 50-years at Suffolk, there are several things that Klipstein said he takes pride in. The paper, for one, was an act of helping to build something from effectively nothing. Though now that he’s stepped back from a full-time role in academia, the professor can’t help but see what he called a decline of people’s appreciation for arts or culture, which breaks down into a decline in appreciation for history or even today’s current events.

“A lot of our problems come from the fact that we have completely denuded the liberal arts,” he said. “I said, so many times, it’s going to start creeping into our politics — we are going

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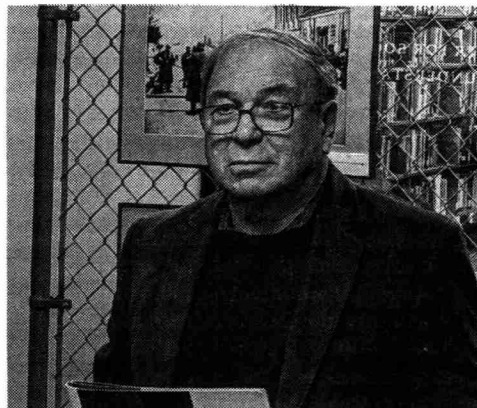
to elect someone who is just basically from image, no substance, just image. And that person is going to get us into a lot of trouble. I swear I said it so many times, it was coming out of my ears, and sure enough, there he is.”

Though Suffolk has not cut any of its liberal arts programs, he said there has been a steady decline in the number of students taking those kinds of classes. Less degrees are requiring liberal arts classes as well. He points to places like Stony Brook University which in 2018 suspended admission into its theater arts, comparative literature and cinema arts programs.. The backlash led to the then-College of Arts and Sciences Dean Sacha Kopp stepping down.

“A university can’t do that, that’s not thinking in the long run ... that basically what students really need to learn, more than anything, is how to critically think,”

Klipstein said. “I think without the ability to think, without the ability to understand the classic structure of your society, both politically and culturally, you lose what you have.”

*Editor’s note: The author of this article was a student of Klipstein when the educator still taught full time at SCCC.*



Steven Klipstein, who taught at Suffolk County Community College for 49 years, is also the academic lead for the Center for Social Justice and Human Understanding. Photo from SCCC