

10.42 Adrian Packer CBE

It is a huge privilege to speak in favour of the national Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre in Victoria Tower Gardens. I have been following this inquiry with great interest. I fully appreciate and respect the scope of expertise in this virtual room and understand that there are strict protocols relating to the way a planning inquiry is conducted.

However, like Natasha Kaplinsky yesterday, I am mindful that my statement is not a technical submission, but rather an expression of a view that the proposal you are considering has significant and far reaching human-interest implications. In my case, those implications relate to children and families, representation of minority groups, cultural and social integration, Fundamental British Values and education.

I was of course particularly moved by the supporting statement from Natasha yesterday, not least because I was reminded of her tireless contributions to the Echo Eternal project that I am here to talk about today.

Echo Eternal was originally inspired by the 112 interviews with Holocaust survivors Natasha spoke of so eloquently yesterday, but that is just the beginning of our story. The project is now a nationally recognised, award winning partnership project, highly praised for its ambition, its reach and its innovation.

Although the Holocaust is quite rightly taught as part of the history curriculum in schools across the country, our project offers a different perspective to learning about the Holocaust and subsequent genocides because it uses testimony to build empathy: empathy between children and survivors and empathy between children and schools with different social and cultural characteristics.

Echo Eternal is a commemorative arts, media and civic engagement project that connects 19 carefully adapted testimonies from the original 112 interviews between Natasha and the survivors with schools across the country. The testimony adaptations were supervised by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education and are now “gifted” to schools to develop their own unique responses: echoes of the testimony, which are co-constructed with an artist in residence, specially trained to navigate the complexities of survivor insights.

Ultimately, the project allows children to develop poignant, beautifully crafted expressions in response to the key messages of each testimony. These are shared in local communities and archived through film versions of each echo. The echoes have a significant impact on the survivors and their families. Sadly, some of the 19 survivors have passed away since the time we started the project. But we take comfort that the survivors consistently tell us that their truth is in safe hands. In the case of one of them, the late Kurt Taussig, this impact was felt so profoundly that his family spoke specifically about how important Echo Eternal was to him AND them in his last days at his funeral last year.

Natasha spoke to you yesterday of bringing a soulful and human perspective to the considerations about the Memorial and Education Centre. In my view, there is nothing more important to humanity than education. There are many excellent examples of how children and young people are taught about the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, but what we have been able to achieve through our partnership with UKHMF is a concept that Holocaust survivor testimony should be an entitlement. We believe every child should have access to testimony and should know that survivors speak an intolerable truth so that future generations are able to listen, learn and become the change we so desperately crave in an increasingly polarised world.

These truths must not be tucked away in a vault or diluted. In fact, the words of survivors should be amplified and given a major platform to be heard far and wide. Testimony should resonate across all communities, transcending faith, culture, ethnicity and national borders. If we are to truly confront hatred and prejudice, we should proactively seek to break down the barriers that lead to it.

This is what our young Echo Eternal participants are so passionate about: engaging with oral history to shape a world where “never again” becomes the reality of *their* legacy to this world. One of our students, Sana, was awarded with our first ever Echo Eternal fellowship this year because she wanted her relationship with survivor Mady Gerard to go beyond a single echo. Sana was so moved by Mady’s accounts of starvation in the camps and her subsequent commitment to eradicate child hunger, that she mobilised her whole local community to support a campaign to work with Save the Children and fundraise in honour of Mady’s testimony.

I long to visit the Memorial and Learning Centre with Sana and the many other students impacted so positively by Echo Eternal in this way.

Beyond the individuals like Sana who have benefitted so positively from the project, I am particularly proud of the social and cultural integration elements of our work. Every year on Holocaust Memorial Day we bring together different communities who have participated in Echo Eternal to share their echoes as one. This solemn act of solidarity goes beyond anything I have ever experienced in my 30 plus years in education.

My current role as CEO of a multi-academy Trust sponsoring schools in Birmingham has helped me shape the principles of Echo Eternal. The majority of our pupils come from so-called minority backgrounds and are far too often referred to as “hard to reach”. This annual Echo Eternal event disproves that notion. We make it easy for children and families from all backgrounds to come together with a single purpose- to pay tribute to our survivors and promote strong messages of civic togetherness.

My initial interest in developing this project with UKHMF’s support was to build on the success of my Trust’s work with the schools we took over in 2014. These schools were at the centre of the so-called Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham. I was struck that UKHMF recognised that the children we serve have the potential to pioneer an approach to bringing the proposed Learning Centre to life before it exists as a physical entity.

When I first arrived in Birmingham in 2014, I was confronted by the complexities of the issues highlighted in Ofsted reports about the schools I was taking over, the most damning Ofsted reports I have ever read. These reports talked about children at risk of extremist ideologies, inadequately prepared for the risks of radicalisation. The children were not aware of life in different parts of the UK and were not well prepared for life in wider society.

In one report it was noted that “Leaders do not sufficiently develop pupils’ understanding of the different customs, traditions or religions that exist in Britain. This does not prepare pupils adequately for life in modern Britain”

The reference to life in modern Britain is particularly note-worthy, as it was the events in these schools in 2014 that led to all English schools being required to teach fundamental British Values. These values including democracy and the rule of law are perhaps universal and arguably not exclusively British values at all. So, our approach has always been to make these values come to life.

Parliament is an undeniable symbol of these values. Before Echo Eternal, students like Sana would not have made that link. Now, Sana sees Parliament as a place of relevance because the learning centre will create a physical link to the place where democracy shapes the rule of law in modern Britain. This will empower her and others to feel that they have a meaningful stake in democracy.

That we pioneered this initial learning in Birmingham is something we are rightly proud of, but our motivation has always been inspired by knowing that our students' voices would find a home worthy of their significance and importance to future generations. We look forward to more echoes from across the whole UK coming together in this single site- to create what has the potential to be the largest social and cultural integration project this country will have ever seen.

When Ofsted returned to our schools three years after I first arrived, they noted how we focused on making our students effective British citizens noting that:

“Pupils are taught how to keep safe; fundamental British values are promoted highly effectively. Powerful partnerships with other organisations provide a range of opportunities to further enrich pupils' spiritual, moral, cultural and social development”

I remain committed to bring children from different backgrounds together and in doing so, I propose that we ensure our national institutions remain relevant and accessible as a conduit to that process. We also need to remember the last of the four British values which speaks of mutual respect and tolerance of difference. Sana's school has a 98 percent Muslim population. Their relationship with Mady is one of the most beautiful embodiments of that value. That same school has hosted regular Echo Eternal events including the annual Great Get Together in memory of the murdered MP Jo Cox, inspired by Jo's legacy as we remember her words that “We have more in common than that which divides us.”

As a proud Member of Parliament, Jo would surely have been approving to see different communities coming together with such strong common purpose within touching reach of where she spoke those words.

I look forward with optimism that Echo Eternal and the testimony that fuels our tributes to Holocaust and subsequent genocide survivors will ultimately find a home in the only place fitting of the magnitude of our project's ambition and its importance to shaping modern British society.