FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Wendy V. Long, Public Relations
(413) 685-1003
WRITTEN BY: William Brown, District Librarian

Holocaust survivors share life stories with Gateway students

Huntington — “I like how empowered she (Annie) was. She had such strength behind everything she said. There was such purpose. She wanted us to understand and convey the power we have over our own lives and to never give up,” said Gateway freshman, Livia Shepard, after her inspirational video conferencing visit with Annie Bleiburg.

On Friday, April 14th, all the students from Mr. Mosher’s 9th grade history classes were able to meet, face-to-face, with one of two Holocaust survivors using the library’s “Distance Learning Corner” and video conferencing equipment. Our first “visitor” was Stephen Berger, a Hungarian Jew who survived a harrowing experience in Strasshof Concentration Camp and also a slave labor camp in Austria later in the war. Berger recalled a time when, towards the beginning of WWII (before Hitler began removing Jews from Hungary), needing a new pair of glasses, he was directed to a medical center. When he arrived, he said, there were piles and piles of glasses stacked on tables.

“Where did all these glasses come from?” he asked.

“Germany”, was the response. They belonged to Jews who had been exterminated in the camps. “We were so stupid,” he confessed. “We had no idea.”

Later, he described being forced onto a train as a 16 year old boy, heading to concentration camps.

“They put us on trains, 3 ½ days on a cattle car standing up; no food, water, bathrooms...You think you are 16. You are pretty tough, but the second day my mind started to play tricks on me. Old people moaning. Some people committing suicide. The smell was unbearable. Every time I tell that story I still have shivers on my back. The worst three and a half days of my life.”

While in the camps, Berger was forced to pull the dead bodies of his fellow Jews from the locations where they were killed and carry them to mass graves. “I was 16 years old, had never seen a dead body before in my life. I did the work because I was forced to do it.”

“After working in the morgue all day I smelled so bad that night my mother passed out. I stripped off all of my clothes and washed myself with Kerosene. I just hoped that no one smoked near me.”

Berger lost 26 close family members at Auschwitz. One of our students, Alyssa Klein asked him, “Were you able to keep your faith when you were going through all this?”, and he responded, “They would call me a Untermenschlich (subhuman), but I was very strong in my Jewish history. When you are 16 years old you don’t think about dying. You want to live, and so they couldn’t destroy my faith... they couldn’t. And I always believed that somehow, some way, I would survive. Of course, there were times when I felt this was my last
day on earth, but they couldn't destroy my mind. They could destroy my body, but they couldn't destroy my mind.”

Due to technological issues, Mr. Berger’s time with students was cut short. Thanks to support from the Gateway Education Foundation, an additional session will be scheduled with him in May or June.

“How is it that I am standing here today? How did I survive? We jumped from the moving train... We thought the war would last maybe a couple of months, but it lasted 2 long, horrible, terrifying years...”

Thus began the testimony of our second visitor, Annie Bleiberg, a Polish Jew who survived Auschwitz, against the odds. Annie’s was a story of surviving under the radar. After her escape from a moving train at the age of 11, she lived in various parts of Poland under false papers (created by German bureaucrats who did not agree with the Nazi movement, at great risk to their lives). Her limited freedom ended when she was betrayed by a former classmate who turned her in. She discussed her subsequent time at Auschwitz, and the unspeakable choices that had to be made.

“A young mother with a baby in her arm gave the baby to her mother so she might have a chance to work. With a baby you had no chance. Soon, grandmother and baby were gone.”

“We were so close to the crematoria we could see the flames and smell the stench but we could do nothing our will to live was taken.”

“I liked her passion and the fact that during all of her hardships she never gave up and fought for her life and never doubted the peace that could come out of such a horrible experience,” said Autumn Marchetto.

Gateway students who listened to Berger and Bleiberg are the age now that the survivors were during World War II.

Both survivors somehow held onto their will-to-live and survived the nightmare. Both resettled in the United States, in New York City, had families, and somehow found happiness. Their goal in participating in this program was to tell their stories so that young people today will be able to put a face to the Holocaust and study, learn, and understand history, so that something like this never happens again.

###