

## **The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program**

One of the major initiatives of The Asper Foundation is its Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program. The program objectives are to promote tolerance and sensitize Canadian high school students to the consequences of racism through a specially designed education program. This program, which started in 1997 in Winnipeg, Canada, is now a national initiative that is inclusive of students from many backgrounds. It is the recipient of the 2004 Human Rights Award from the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

In 2000, for the first time, this program became a national initiative. All students are required to take an 18-hour education program, or its equivalent, on human rights and the Holocaust with an added emphasis on American history and the civil rights movement. The curriculum for the educational component of the program was developed specifically by Holocaust and human rights educators for The Asper Foundation. After the educational component is completed, students participate in a trip to Washington, D.C., where they spend several days at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and other important monuments relating to freedom. The students are also required to volunteer in their communities on public projects of their choosing when they return.

The last component of the program is an evening graduation ceremony held to present a Memorandum for Personal Responsibility to each student. This document was commissioned by The Asper Foundation specifically for this program and written by Dr. Israel Asper. The Memorandum aims to provide each student with a sense of the importance that they participated in the program and to remind them that they have a personal responsibility for the world community. The ceremony is a wonderful way to provide the students with closure to the formal part of the program as well as the sense that they are now beginning a new life of greater understanding and tolerance.

The value of this program is reflected in the support it receives across the country by private and public foundations, organizations and individuals who understand its importance. Another measure of the program's value is the fact that in Washington, D.C., for several years, Congressman Tom Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor ever elected to the U.S. Congress, has met with and spoken to program participants about the importance of understanding and protecting human rights. Congressman Lantos describes the program as "outstanding."

A significant portion of the costs of the program are borne by The Asper Foundation. Since the program's inception over 5000 students and chaperones of many faiths and backgrounds in 49 cities spanning nine provinces across Canada will have participated in this initiative.