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In death, Weitz's story will live on

By Matthew K. Roy Staff writer

PEABODY — It did not matter if it was a class of rambunctious fifth-graders or cynical college students, Sonia Schreiber Weitz always had their rapt attention.

"She had a soft voice and a powerful message, and she really could capture any audience," said Martha Holden, director of the Peabody Institute Library.

Weitz shared her story about living through the Holocaust and challenged listeners to never be bystanders in the face of evil and injustice. Despite her passing late Wednesday, Weitz's message survives in the thousands of students on the North Shore and beyond who heard it and took it home with them.

Weitz, who had cancer, died at her Peabody home. She was 81.

Born in Krakow, Poland, Weitz endured the Krakow Ghetto and survived five Nazi death camps during World War II, including Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. She lost her parents and more than 80 members of her extended family during the war.

Weitz was 16 when the U.S. Army liberated the Mauthausen death camp in 1945. She moved to Peabody with her sister, Blanca, and brother-in-law, Norbert, three years later.

Here, with her late husband, Mark Weitz, she started a family. She also, in her poetry and eloquent verbal testimony, chronicled her past and relayed the lessons of the nightmare she escaped. In 1982, she and her friend Harriet Wacks established the Holocaust Center Boston North in Peabody.

"The people she influenced will never forget her," Wacks said yesterday. "Most of us will never touch so many people in such a positive way."

Her annual visit was the course highlight for Christopher Mauriello's Salem State College students.

"She connected really well with students," said Mauriello, chairman of the college's history department and vice president of the Holocaust Center. "It was electric."

The Holocaust is a "historical abstraction" that students have a hard time comprehending, Mauriello said.

"She put a face on the Holocaust," he said. "She put a face on history."

Weitz is survived by her three children — Don Weitz of Dallas, Andi and her husband, Nachman Vilnai, of Israel, and Sandy Weitz of Peabody. She also had three grandchildren.

"She was a very caring, loving person with a great sense of humor," Sandy, 55, said. "We're going to miss her tremendously."

Mayor Michael Bonfanti called Weitz a "remarkable woman, with a remarkable story to tell."

"The word 'classy' always came to mind," Bonfanti said. "It was the way she carried herself, the way she spoke. She did everything with such dignity."

When he first heard Weitz's poem, "Victory," Bonfanti said he was moved to tears. It recalls an improbable meeting between Weitz and her father at Plaszow, a slave-labor camp. In the shadow of a barbed-wire fence, Weitz's dad asked her to dance.

"I danced with you that one time only.

How sad you were, how tired, lonely ...

You knew that they would "take" you soon ...

So when your bunk-mate played a tune

You whispered: "little one, let us dance,

We may not have another chance."

Listening to Weitz, Bonfanti said, "opened his eyes."

"We often hear something, but we don't listen. But when you heard Sonia talk, you couldn't help but listen," he said.

Weitz authored a book of poetry and a memoir, "I Promised I Would Tell." She won numerous awards, including the ADL Interfaith Award, Hadassah Myrtle Wreath Award, B'nai B'rith Woman of the Year, and Facing History and Ourselves Humanity Award. Earlier this month, she was honored as "A Woman of Courage" by Temple Ner Tamid in Peabody.

She energetically accepted the responsibility of ensuring people remembered and learned from the Holocaust.

"Who better to speak about light after darkness than me?" she often said.

In 2002, President George W. Bush appointed her to serve on the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, which oversees the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. During an interview related to the appointment, Weitz asked who nominated her, assuming it was professor Elie Wiesel, Congressman John Tierney or somebody else in a high-profile position who knew of her work.

Weitz, however, was gratified to discover that it was Tarah Donoghue, then a Georgetown University student and White House intern, who pushed for her nomination. Donoghue did not know Weitz personally, but she vividly remembered Weitz's visit to her class at St. Mark's Prep School in Southborough.

"Sonia was just a courageous human being who taught the modern world to love and not to hate," said Dr. Marvin Wilson, professor of biblical studies at Gordon College. "There have been thousands of students affected by Sonia's story and her call to remember the past so people don't repeat it."

Weitz returned to speak at Gordon College, a Christian institution in Wenham, for 29 consecutive years. She was committed, Wilson said, to making interfaith connections and strengthening the relationship between local Christians and Jews.

She spoke to the freshmen class every year at St. John's Prep, a Catholic boys school in Danvers that Weitz's son attended. At its baccalaureate service at the end of the year, the school gives out the Sonia Weitz Human Rights Award.

During one of her visits to St. John's, Weitz met Hebrew Scriptures teacher Mary Kiley. Kiley marveled at Weitz's capacity to continually "choose life" by confronting and not running from the horrors of her past.

"She was really a woman of courage," Kiley said. "She did not crawl into a hole, she did not pull the covers over her head."

Kiley is Weitz's Legacy Partner, which means she has promised to share Weitz's story in schools and churches for years to come. In other words, Weitz will not be forgotten.

"It will be impossible for her story to be put on the shelf," Kiley said.

Services for Weitz will be held at 11 a.m. on Sunday at Temple Ner Tamid, 368 Lowell St., Peabody. Interment will follow in Sharon Memorial Park, Sharon. Memorial Observance for family only on Sunday. Condolence calls may be made at her late residence on Monday and Tuesday from 2 to 8 p.m. In lieu of flowers, expressions of sympathy in her memory may be donated to the Holocaust Center Boston North Inc., 82 Main St., Peabody, MA 01960.

Words on Weitz

"Sonia Weitz taught us all lessons about the importance of tolerance and the need to stand up against bigotry and hatred. She shared her personal story and her wisdom with dignity and grace. I have considered it a privilege to know and be friendly with someone so substantial and deservedly respected for her commitment to justice and fairness."

Congressman John Tierney

"The word 'classy' always came to mind. It was the way she carried herself, the way she spoke. She did everything with such dignity. ... We often hear something, but we don't listen. But when you heard Sonia talk, you couldn't help but listen."

Mayor Michael Bonfanti

"She was one of the warmest, kindest and most loving people who I've met in my life. She was incredible."

Neil Donnenfeld of Swampscott, who partnered with Weitz at the Holocaust Centers Legacy Partners program

"When Sonia spoke, you could here a pin drop. She had a soft voice and a powerful message, and she really could capture any audience."

Martha Holden, director of the Peabody Institute Library

"She was my hero. ... She never refused to educate students about the Holocaust. She was always there for us. ... We all would sit mesmerized by what she had to say."

Sheldon Brown, social sciences professor at North Shore Community College

"The people she influenced will never forget her for generations to come. Most of us will never touch so many people in such a positive way."

Harriett Wacks, co-founder of the Holocaust Center Boston North

"I lost a close friend, and a generation of students lost a connection to the Holocaust that only Sonia could provide. ... She put a face on the Holocaust. She put a face on history."

Christopher Mauriello, chairman of the Salem State College History Department

"She was a very caring, loving person with a great sense of humor. We're going to miss her tremendously."

Sandy Weitz, 55, Weitz's daughter

"Sonia was just a courageous human being who taught the modern world to love and not to hate. ... There have been thousands of students affected by Sonia's story and her call to remember the past so people don't repeat it."

Dr. Marvin Wilson, professor of biblical studies at Gordon College