



Lesson Plan: **Leon Bass- A Broader Perspective on Tolerance**

GUIDING FOCUS: Learning about the life and legacy of Leon Bass, a lifelong Philadelphian who fought in a segregated army unit in WWII and liberated the Buchenwald concentration camp. He went on to become a principal of Benjamin Franklin High School and a human rights activist. Leon’s unique perspective as both a victim of oppression and a witness to oppression engaged wider audiences and spoke to the universality of bigotry and intolerance.

LESSON GOALS: media literacy, empathy building, upstander/bystander, agency and advocacy

AGE- This lesson is best for grade levels 7-12. A glossary can be found at the end of the lesson for younger age groups.

Lesson components:

1. Warm Up
2. Leon Bass Biography
 - Intersectionality
 - Critical questions
3. Optional: Virtual OR in person site visit of the Horwitz-Wasserman Memorial Plaza
 - Teacher and students should download the IWalk app ([instructions](#))
4. Reflection
5. Independent research
6. Additional learning
7. Glossary

PAGES 6-9 MAY BE PRINTED FOR STUDENTS

1. Warm Up

Have students pair and share what it means to be an activist. They can think of people they believe are activists. Teachers can have students share if they would like with the class.

2. Leon Bass Biography (30min)

As a class, [watch](#) an interview with Leon Bass from 1988 (12:29 minutes)

Read full biography together or independently.

“Something happened when I walked through the [Buchenwald concentration camp] gates. My blinders came off. My tunnel vision dissipated. And I began to realize that human suffering is not delegated just to me and mine. Human suffering touches everybody. All people can suffer.”

Born and raised in Philadelphia in a predominantly black neighborhood, Leon Bass grew up a happy child in a large loving family and community. Philadelphia had what Bass understood as “unwritten rules”

segregating him from white Philadelphians but he did not think much of it as a young man. His parents were both from South Carolina where they had experienced intense racism. They taught their children tolerance and respect for all. Leon attended West Philadelphia High School where he loved history, English and art, and upon graduating in 1943, he volunteered to fight in World War II. Leon enlisted for adventure and intrigue, not entirely out of morality. He had heard of Adolf Hitler but knew nothing of the camps or the systematic murder taking place.

The U.S army was segregated and during training Leon would travel to the South, to Georgia and Mississippi, where he experienced racism from locals and army leadership. He was angry that putting his life on the line to serve his country was not enough for him to be considered equal to white soldiers in his own country.

“I wasn’t good enough in Macon, Georgia to get a drink of water at a public water fountain. And in Beaumont, Texas they still said I wasn’t good enough to eat a meal in a restaurant... What a damnable experience to have when you’re 18 years of age and you volunteered to serve your country.”

Leon was part of the 183rd Engineering Combat Battalion and worked with other soldiers to do investigation. Almost all of the soldiers in this smaller unit had gone to college and Leon attributed his motivation to continue schooling after the War to these young black men. While serving, he participated in the Battle of the Bulge and the liberation of Buchenwald. He was scouting locations to set up camp in Vellmar, Germany when his Lieutenant brought Leon and two fellow soldiers to a concentration camp.

“In all the training they had given me, no one ever mentioned concentration camps. But on this day in April, in 1945, I was going to have the shock of my life because I was going to walk through the gates of a concentration camp called Buchenwald. And you got to believe me when I tell you that I was not ready for that. I was totally unprepared for that kind of a situation. But you see, I can never, ever forget the day. It was that spring day in April when I walked through those gates and I saw in front of me what I call the walking dead... I saw human beings, human beings that had been beaten and starved and tortured and denied everything – everything that would make life livable. There they stood in front of me. They were skin and bone. They had skeletal faces with deep-set eyes. Their heads had been clean-shaved, and they stood in these ragged, stripe-type pajamas. Some were naked. I could see sores on their bodies and I was told that came from malnutrition.”

“[A] young man, who spoke English, began to tell us about Buchenwald... that these people were Jews and Gypsies, they were trade unionists and Communists...He went through a litany of groups, saying these people were incarcerated there because they, if I can use a term I used before, saying they were not good enough. Saying they had been put here for one purpose and that was to be worked until they died, starved until they died....”

Leon returned to the U.S. in January 1946 poised to be an activist. Leon attended West Chester State College where he experienced significant racism- he was not allowed to live in the dormitories or eat in local restaurants. Inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Leon began to channel his anger at racial injustice into positive action and was active in the Civil Rights movement. He continued his education to receive

his Masters and Doctoral degrees, as well as his principal's and superintendent's certifications, and became an educator in all black schools in Philadelphia.

Leon served as principal of Benjamin Franklin High School for 14 years where he engaged black students in their learning and success in a way the overwhelming white administration of the school had not done before. At one point, he observed students disrespecting a classroom visitor- a Holocaust survivor named Nina Kaleska who was trying to tell her story. Leon spoke at length with Nina, and when she heard his experience at Buchenwald, she encouraged him to tell his story. Leon began speaking to the students in his school about liberating Buchenwald.

His Holocaust education program was so successful in his school, that he started speaking at educational institutions all over the country. He became a noted lecturer on the subject of racism and the Holocaust. Leon's unique perspective as both a victim of oppression and a witness to oppression engaged wider audiences and spoke to the universality of bigotry and intolerance.

A beloved activist and educator, he died at age 90 in 2015.

Intersectionality

Read the following quotes from Leon Bass' USC Shoah Foundation testimony and discuss the critical questions.

When asked about how he was affected by what he saw in Buchenwald he said:

I was not the same anymore. I came in with one feeling of anger at my country really angry about what was happening to me, but now I realized that all the pain and suffering was not relegated to just me. And those like me. That pain can touch everybody. So many different kinds of people... and that's what I saw there and that changed me, it made me know that we have a connection. That what happens to you can happen to me... And it's all because of bigotry and prejudice and all of that hate and antisemitism was right there, it had been carried to the ultimate and I knew that was something we had to get rid of because I had experienced it, you see. I was told that I wasn't good enough these same people in here were told by Nazi Germany that they weren't good enough so they couldn't be allowed to live. So yeah, I became a different person. I knew we had to do something about that evil."

Leon was asked: "Why do you Leon as a black person why are you talking about this holocaust when it something that happened with white people and Jews." He responded, "It's not black and it's not white it's a human problem."

When Bass was in college he went to a theater and sat on the main floor which was limited to white theatergoers. Reflecting on this action he said:

"...that was my protest you see, letting them know that I was good enough... I went back feeling so good about what I had done. I stood up for what I believed to be right. It was a risk but I didn't think the price was too high."

Critical Questions

1. In terms of Bass's personal experience, what did he mean by "not good enough"?
2. What did Bass realize after his experiences in Buchenwald concentration camp?

3. What does it mean to be civically engaged? What are actions that demonstrate what we believe in and what we are willing to stand up for?

3. Optional- Virtual or In Person IWalk- Contemporary Antisemitism (45min)

Teachers may choose to add a virtual or in person tour of the Horwitz-Wasserman Memorial Plaza to enhance student understanding of the lesson context. Below find guidance for which tour to take and some reflection questions. The reflection can be done without having completed the tour of the site. Note that a tour will add an additional 45 minutes to 1.5 hours to the lesson.

In order to complete the lesson, have students download the IWalk app (instructions found [here](#)). If the class is at the Memorial Plaza together have students walk around as they complete the tour. The lesson can also be completed virtually.

Students should complete the *Contemporary Antisemitism* lesson. Consider that when Leon Bass went to Europe as a soldier he knew who Hitler was but nothing of the concentration camps. When we look at social media or the news, how can we be critical and thoughtful about what we see? Students should look at [Antisemitism Explained](#) to further discuss media literacy- identifying racist and antisemitic imagery.

4. Reflection (20min)

"...The evil is still with us- it has not gone away. We have just to look at the news, the television the papers... I'm talking about racism, antisemitism, bigotry, and prejudice, I'm talking about all that hate and more. All that stuff is still with us and it's up to us to deal with it. And when I talk to young people about this I tell them... if you dare to fight the evil... you better be ready because the pain can be excruciating. The people that you thought you could be friends with will turn on you and talk about you, 'why are you talking about that Holocaust, why are you talking about all this racism?'... But then you have to answer the question: is the price too high to stand up for what you believe is right? I don't believe it is."

1. When he returned to Philadelphia, how did his experience in the War and at Buchenwald transform his thinking?
2. How did Bass channel his knowledge after the War? In college? In the Civil Rights Movement? Or as an educator?
3. Think about how these stories are told and how we remember them. If survivors and first-person perspectives are dwindling, how do we make sure the stories are not forgotten?
4. Discuss the position of a bystander, upstander and collaborator. What do these mean and what do they look like in WWII? How did Leon Bass act when he was confronted with intolerance and bigotry? How about in our present day? Can you think of an example when you or somebody you know was an upstander?

5. Independent Research

Have students research liberators- have them look at testimonies from liberators to different camps or soldiers from different countries. [Choose one](#) from Kean University's Holocaust Resource Center.

6. Additional Learning- recommend class listens/watches one together

[Listen](#) to an interview with Leon Bass from 2008 (17:21 minutes. Transcript is also included)

[Watch](#) an interview with Leon Bass from 1988 (12:29 minutes)

[Watch](#) Leon Bass speak with Facing History and Ourselves (33:52 minutes)

7. Glossary

Racial Segregation- The act of keeping people separate based on race. In the United States the Jim Crow Laws repressed the rights and access of African Americans to social settings, education and politics- it was the law that African Americans could only use the spaces and facilities meant for them and could not use the same as White Americans.

Liberation- The act of freeing someone from imprisonment- in this case the freeing of survivors from the Nazi concentration camps at the end of World War II in spring of 1945.

Concentration Camp- A place where large numbers of people, especially political prisoners and persecuted minorities are imprisoned. Between 1933 and 1945 the Nazis made several hundred camps in which Jewish, Black, Roma, mentally or physically challenged people were imprisoned to work to death or be immediately murdered.

Bystander, Upstander, Collaborator- A bystander will see injustice and does not intervene or act. An upstander will do something to try and stop the injustice. A collaborator will actively engage in the injustice.

Civic Engagement- Participating in activities meant to improve the quality of life in one's community by addressing issues that help the public.

Civil Rights Movement- Though it began after the Civil War, the Movement generally refers to the period between 1954 and 1965 in which demonstrations took place across the United States calling for an end to the "separate but equal" Jim Crow Laws and constitutional equality for African Americans.

For any questions about this lesson plan please reach out to Operations Manager, Sophie Don at sdon@philaholocaustmemorial.org

STUDENT READING AND QUESTIONS

Leon Bass Biography

“Something happened when I walked through the [Buchenwald concentration camp] gates. My blinders came off. My tunnel vision dissipated. And I began to realize that human suffering is not delegated just to me and mine. Human suffering touches everybody. All people can suffer.”

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