

Dr. Helen N. Fagin Holocaust Collection of the Jane Bancroft Cook Library
New College of Florida
January 20, 2008 Sainer Pavilion, Sarasota, FL

Introductory Remarks:

Dr. Gordon E. “Mike” Michalson, president, New College of Florida

...The establishment of the Helen Fagin Collection marks the fortuitous fusing of Helen Fagin’s life experience and educational legacy with the central mission of the New College, and also the growth of our Judaic Studies program over the last 15 years, in which we have expanded our curriculum and established a permanent chair (the Klingenstein chair).

....We could not be more honored or gratified by this occasion. It is heartening, inspiring and at the same time very sobering – an awkward combination, but a combination appropriate on a campus committed to harnessing the powers of critical intelligence for the promotion of the common human good. That is a complex and challenging undertaking in itself, so it is no wonder that we have awkward and uncomfortable moments on campus trying to balance these aspects of our mission. I often tell students who are upset by something they’ve heard that a good little arts college *should* be an uncomfortable place. It should get you out of your comfort zone to think fresh thoughts and view the world in fresh ways.

We are a liberal arts college committed to promoting critical thinking based on sound reasoning, publicly available evidence, tolerance for gray areas where matters are fundamentally complex, opaque or ambiguous and openness to alternative points of view – points of view to be debated on the merits of the argument and the viewpoint and never by attacking the person holding the opposing view.

Note the natural fit between these intellectual virtues and Helen Fagin’s lifelong battle against prejudice and hatred and intolerance. Moreover, as a career educator, Dr. Fagin understands the critical importance of always reaching out to the next generation to make sure they are informed and educated regarding the worst feature of the human condition. Vigilance on this point should never be taken for granted as we survey a post WWII landscape infected by continual genocidal outbreaks, whether in Cambodia, Serbia, Rawanda or Dafur.

Since my own field of study is moderate religious thought in the West, I’ve had numerous courses in which students are exposed to post-Holocaust Jewish thought, where we always begin with a firm grounding in the historical databasic factual matters that need no sensationalizing, no exaggerating to sink in with quiet and powerful effect on our thoughtful undergraduates. This exposure is an aspect of what we might call the moral obligation associated with the education we provide our students.

So it is particularly gratifying that at New College, we will have, through this library collection and the resources associated with it, the valuable additional means through which we can meet this moral obligation in the decades ahead.