Anne Frank Sapling Planted at United Nations to Educate and Inspire Future Generations

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Today, on what would have been Anne Frank’s 90th birthday, a tree was planted in her memory on the grounds of the United Nations Headquarters in New York. But not just any tree.

In the two years Anne spent in hiding at the “Secret Annex”—her name for the hideaway she and her family occupied to avoid capture by the Nazis—she would often sit and watch the great horse chestnut tree that stood outside an attic window.

“Nearly every morning I go to the attic to blow the stuffy air out of my lungs. From my favorite spot on the floor I look up at the blue sky and the bare chestnut tree, on whose branches little raindrops shine, appearing like silver, and at the seagulls and other birds as they glide on the wind,” she wrote in her diary on February 23, 1944. “As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances might be.”

The tree outlasted the typical chestnut tree lifespan of 150 by a significant margin, but it did finally collapse in 2010 at the hands of a strong storm and after years of fungal disease at the age of 230. Still, Anne wasn’t wrong.

Wisely, a few years before the tree fell, the Anne Frank House stewards created saplings of the tree, which have multiplied to create more than 300 direct descendants. The saplings have been distributed throughout a dozen nations across the world.

The Anne Frank Center for Mutual Respect received more than a dozen of the saplings and in 2013 established The Sapling Project, which donates the trees to worthy educational organizations across the U.S., which include Sonoma State University, the 9/11 Memorial, the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol, and the Washington State Holocaust Resource Center in Seattle. Future saplings are planned to demarcate significant historical sites such as Central High School, where the Little Rock Nine defied racial segregation in 1957.

As they grow, the saplings act not only as living reminders of those who have passed, but as tools to educate future generations about the history of Holocaust, a service that is increasingly critical.
Nearly a quarter of American Millennials say they’ve never heard of the Holocaust, or are unsure of whether they have. And about half of all adults in the U.S., Millennial or otherwise, are unable to name even one of the more than 40,000 concentration camps and ghettos from one of the darkest times in global history.*

Schools and other organizations that have received the saplings have seen a dramatic rise in the cultural and historic awareness of their students. Lessons that can connect something tangible and living to the past do a far better job of educating students of all ages.

“Perhaps in part because of their time in hiding, Anne Frank often mentions nature as a source of spiritual rejuvenation,” says Elisa Rapaport, Chief Operating Officer of the Anne Frank Center. “It’s such a gift that these descendants of the actual tree that inspired her will inspire future generations, as well, reminding us of the past and the hope for a brighter world ahead.”

Today’s sapling planting and dedication was made possible by the Anne Frank Center’s partnership with The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme, a group that has also worked with the center to host educational outreach programs commemorating Kristallnacht and Holocaust Remembrance Day.

It’s a labor of love, patience, and commitment to care for the saplings, which required a multi-year quarantine through the Department of Agriculture before they could be planted. The trees require the right latitude and environmental conditions.

The Anne Frank Center’s Garden Initiative similarly gives communities a peaceful place to enjoy the natural beauty Anne admired amidst perennial beds, stepping stones, and sculpture. The center is working to establish more partnerships throughout the country, as educational hubs that can host programs and work as local extensions of AFC efforts, bringing together members of the community—such as artists, teachers, landscapers, and public figures—for a common goal. A garden in Huntington, New York, was established in 2010 through the collective efforts of such community figures.

The Anne Frank Center is currently reviewing several proposals from other potential sites to host future Anne Frank chestnut saplings.

*Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

What is done cannot be undone, but one can prevent it happening again.
—Anne Frank

About the Anne Frank Center:
The Anne Frank Center for Mutual Respect offers educational programs, traveling exhibits, and theatrical performances to share the impact of the message of Anne Frank’s diary by promoting respect for all humanity.

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