

Diploma a milestone of near-centenarian's Holocaust triumph

By Barbi Walker-Walsh

Oskar Knoblauch wasn't like the others waiting for their diploma on a warm May day at his high school graduation ceremony.

He already had an eight-page resumé summing up a lifetime of experiences that are a massive part of history – history that graduating students had learned in class. Knoblauch is a 98½-year-old Holocaust survivor.

Knoblauch received his honorary diploma thanks to an accommodation on May 20, thanks to the generosity of folks at Chandler High School.

2024, because he has educated and advocated for over 17 years the importance of remembering the Holocaust while teaching about tolerance and peace at Chandler schools and organizations worldwide.

"I never graduated from high school. If we take all the school years put together in my lifetime, I went to school for four years. Period," he told me. "I actually got most of my education during the war and after the war."

Knoblauch spent his youth in the German Nazi concentration camp in Krakow, Poland. There, he worked in the basement boiler room of the ginormous building used for the Gestapo police headquarters and the SD (Security Department), the SS and the SP (Security Police). Although Knoblauch missed high school and a significant portion of his education, his intellectual prowess continues to be a testament to his resilience and thirst for knowledge. During the pandemic, he even held Zoom meetings with the FBI to share his knowledge and experience. He continues to tell his story of survival but also of being an upstander. So, for Knoblauch, his honorary diploma helps assure his legacy of never letting humanity forget about the past to help create a better future.

"Oh, it was exciting!" Knoblauch said to wear the gown and hat and receive his honorary diploma that day. It's a culmination of a lifetime of achievements.

It was something he'd not been able to do in his youth. This was a milestone that was taken away from him as a young boy during the Holocaust. Thanks to the efforts of Oskar's granddaughter, Jyll Harthun, the Arizona Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) and a teacher from Chandler High School, they could honor Knoblauch. A man who lost so



Family and friends of Oskar Knoblauch were on hand for the ceremony.

— Photo courtesy Jack Harthun

much in his youth but has given so much more back to help people learn to choose kindness over hate, forgiveness over grudges, and to find ways to connect with one another despite our differences.

Harthun says that when her grandfather tells his story of survival, he always ends it with the most important part of his survival, the moral of being an upstander, of having respect, tolerance and love because that is why he survived.

Sitting at his daughter and son-in-law's cozy and inviting home in the Arcadia area of Phoenix, Knoblauch is clear, sharp, witty and smiles easily. In fact, he laughs easily. He sees the seriousness in life but also the beauty in every tiny aspect. I listened to one of his podcasts on my way to my interview with him, and it was amazing. I was wrapt listening to him talk with his granddaughter, the host of the "Tomorrow Will Be a Better Day" podcast, about the beauty of the cacti flower. I've lived in the desert my entire life, and I'm a native Arizonan, and never have I seen the short-lived flower of the cacti as clearly and visceral as I did listening to him on that podcast.

But that's what Knoblauch does — he teaches people to see, listen, and recognize the world around them. He teaches people to connect with the other humans on this planet, regardless of how

different they may seem from each other. Even if they are your captors in a Nazi camp.

He said that regardless of color or religion, you must work together to be an upstander, including yourself. He adds that you should be proud of yourself, even in the face of a bully. He had to do this in the face of his captor, but it won him respect. When he stood up to a German SS officer, that officer not only saved his life but also became his friend. Knoblauch said that the officer was an upstander. Although it's hard for teenagers to figure out how to stand up for themselves sometimes, it can change everything when they do. And it starts with being proud of who you are. Smile and be proud of who you are. Not only does it change you, but it also changes how others perceive you.

"It's amazing what that inner confidence, regardless of how people are going to perceive you, whether they're still going to bully you, chase you," he said. "But the inner confidence changes the trajectory."

He also reminds students of the importance of standing up when they see clear injustice, citing civilians who helped him survive. Knoblauch's legacy of teaching hope, love, tolerance and kindness is a lesson that can and should continue throughout our lifetimes.