



## **#6: Stitching History from the Holocaust: The Hedwig Project** **by Bob Kann**

*I learned that the people killed {in the Holocaust} aren't just numbers.  
Each person has their own story.*  
~Sophie 7th grade

With the assistance of the Jewish Museum Milwaukee and Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Arts @ Large led 7th and 8th graders from Fernwood Montessori School and Westside Academy II in an in-depth exploration of the production processes of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater Costume Shop. Over the course of two weeks, students conducted interviews and produced a body of more than seven hundred photographs while discovering the unique life and legacy of a talented Jewish dress designer.

The story began when staff members of the Jewish Museum were given a letter written in 1939 by a Czech Jew named Paul Strnad. Seeking to escape the imminent Nazi regime, Paul and his wife Hedwig (fondly referred to as Hedy) sought to obtain affidavits in order to emigrate to the United States. Together they wrote to their cousin Alvin in Milwaukee, sending along eight of Hedwig's sketches. They hoped that these designs would provide ample proof of their financial independence and artistic skill. Tragically, Paul and Hedy perished in the Holocaust, and Hedy's exquisitely designed day dresses and gowns were never produced.

In January 2014 the Jewish Museum Milwaukee staged the exhibit "Stitching History from the Holocaust" to explore the life and work of Hedy Strnad before her murder. The main feature of this exhibit was the recreation of Hedy's dresses from her sketches. The key messages were:

- Each victim of the Holocaust has his/her own story that deserves to be remembered.
- The Holocaust not only took human lives, but also their contributions to our world.
- The material items around us are an important means of remembering and discerning information about culture and history (drawn designs, dresses, photos, letters, recordings, etc.).
- The actions of people in our world today can meaningfully help to remember those lost.

Eight MPS students from Fernwood Montessori and Westside Academy were invited behind the scenes to experience the once-in-a-lifetime process of the effort to bring Strnad's designs to life. Students worked with artist and photographer Brianna Seipel to document the dress production. She gave them a crash course in photography because it was a last-minute project. They soon went to the Rep studios where they explored pattern-making, fabric printing, draping, and millinery with the Rep staff while learning basic photographic and interviewing techniques.

Not only did they gain practical photo documentation skills, but the Rep experience exposed students to the history of fashion design, potential career opportunities in the arts today, and the power of personal narrative expressed through one's craft. Students interviewed different seamstresses and spoke with the milliners. Inspired by Hedy's sketches, students created life-size portraits. Together they explored the meaning of self-portraiture, and how their work, like Hedwig's, was a powerful reflection of self-esteem and respect. At the end of the project, the students gave several public presentations about their explorations including speaking before hundreds of women at the Women's Fund of Greater Milwaukee luncheon.

Brianna Seipel described these presentations, "They did a fantastic job explaining what they had learned. I definitely saw their competence increase presentation to presentation, and their enthusiasm to tell the story."

The legacy of Hedwig Strnad encourages young people to use the arts as a vehicle to express their thoughts and ideas. Through her story, students learned that their artistic voice can have an impact for social, political, and personal change for generations to come. Unique experiences like the Hedwig project transform the way students think not only about the world, but more importantly, how they perceive themselves and the value they bring to the world as artists, thinkers, and peacemakers.

The book *Stitching History from the Holocaust: The Hedwig Project*, designed with the help of students, is a celebration of their work, complete with photography, fine art, and written reflections, inspired by the life of Hedwig Strnad.





## About the Author

Bob Kann grew up in Skokie, Illinois, but it happened so long ago that he remembers nothing of the event.

As a child, he loved sports above all else and could perform a standing back flip by the age of nine. His mother worried that reading nothing but sports books would stunt Bob's intellectual growth, but his older brother assured her that he would eventually read books on other topics (he did). Little did any of them know that he also would write several books including a book about a baseball player and another about an athlete who competed in several sports. Listening to his father's tales about growing up during the Depression, driving at the age of twelve to make deliveries for his father's store, and other stories of the south side of Chicago planted the seeds for Bob's later passion for storytelling.

Bob attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, became a teacher, received his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and later a Professor of Education at UW-Parkside and UW-Stevens Point. Shortly after becoming a professor, Bob realized he liked making his students laugh more than he liked teaching them. He recognized that what he wanted to next undertake was simultaneously entertaining children and adults since this seemed limitlessly interesting and creative.

In 1982, Bob became a storyteller, juggler, and magician who began performing for children and families throughout the United States. In 1985, he realized that being a former teacher/professor turned entertainer, he had unique insights into the relationship between entertainment and education. Hence, he began teaching graduate classes and presenting keynotes and workshops for educators and nonprofit organizations on topics related to humor, storytelling, creativity, and motivation. (Coincidentally, A@L CEO Emeritus contracted with Bob to perform at the PumpHouse Regional Arts Center in LaCrosse, WI at the beginning of his career. Bob continued providing great educational programming at various organizations where Sullivan worked and subsequently was one of the first artists to work with Arts @ Large in 2001.)

As a free-lancer for more than thirty years, Bob has developed many interests which have led him to produce storytelling tapes and write books for children, design curriculum for teachers, collect and write historical stories for nonprofit organizations, and apply his research skills as a consultant for social service agencies.

Bob believes it's easier to climb the ladder of success when it's lying flat on the ground. He usually can be found reading his favorite book on levitation. He simply can't put it down.