

People Of The Year • BROOKHAVEN EDITION

Schrier teaches others to embrace differences



Photo by Erika Karp

Steven Schrier, pictured above at the Suffolk Center on the Holocaust, Diversity & Human Understanding, has been at the helm of the group for a decade.

BY ERIKA KARP

Hidden on the second floor of the Huntington Library at the Suffolk County Community College's Selden campus is a haunting collection of items from the Holocaust and materials that chronicle slavery in America.

The Suffolk Center on the Holocaust, Diversity & Human Understanding, a nonprofit organization that promotes cultural understanding, maintains the collection. In addition, the center, which was founded 10 years ago, runs diversity awareness programs and educates locals on the importance of respecting all people,

regardless of their differences.

While the center is still very much a secret gem among educators and the college community, it has continued to grow. This year, the organization's major project, Embracing Our Differences, an outdoor art exhibition and contest, received more submissions than ever before.

Much of this success is owed to the organization's executive director, Steven Schrier. For his efforts to make Suffolk County a more accepting place, Schrier is one of The Village Times Herald's People of the Year.

Steven Klipstein, an English professor at SCCC and the center's assistant director, said he is a great admirer of Schrier's

work. Despite having little funding, Schrier, 63, of Poquott, has grown the center through his tireless work ethic and innovative ways of thinking.

"He was always extremely on top of things, very bright and very fair. ... One of the most decent, moral men I've ever known," Klipstein said. "He's not loud about things."

Eleanor Kra, the center's board of directors chairperson, said Schrier has a rational approach to things.

Schrier's evenhandedness was apparent during a recent interview.

He said he has seen firsthand how the college has become more diverse, and therefore more accepting.

Schrier has been on the college staff for more than 35 years, beginning as legal counsel and later becoming vice president — a position he held for more than 20 years. He also teaches classes on the Bill of Rights, and on state and local government.

"In the 10 years that I've been teaching those courses, I have seen a shift in attitudes of students to be more accepting of people with differences, especially of immigrants," he said.

Carol Brown, a member of the center's advisory committee and coordinator for Eastern Suffolk BOCES Arts-in-Education programs, described Schrier as organized, caring and generous.

"He wants to make sure that the programs run, and run well," she said.

Kra said Schrier has all of the qualities

an executive director should possess.

He has "a very delicate sense of what is the right thing to do and what is the effective way to do it," she said.

The Embracing Our Differences project, which Schrier and board member Vicki Wacksman introduced eight years ago, is one of the center's triumphs repeatedly mentioned by those interviewed.

The annual project includes programs, activities and an art show each fall that showcases amateur and professional artists of all ages with their works about diversity, on display as billboard-sized images.

Klipstein said it was Schrier's idea to align the project with Suffolk County's Unity Day — despite the associated work required to do so.

Schrier doesn't seem to be afraid to devote extra time to the job. Rabbi Steven Moss, the center's advisory committee chairperson, said he admires Schrier for his devotion to the job and making sure the center grows.

Schrier said the group is currently working to create a mobile museum — equipped with artifacts and interactive displays — that will be able to travel to schools. However, it won't be easy, as much more funding is needed to make the museum on wheels a reality.

But if there is anyone who can see it to fruition, Schrier will be the one.

"He's the engine that really makes the center on the Holocaust move forward," Moss said.