USC Shoah Foundation opens new office, kicks off 25th anniversary commemoration

Event marks the start of the 25th anniversary of the institute, which shares testimonies of 55,000 survivors of the Holocaust and other genocides

By Josh Grossberg | November 6, 2018

USC SHOAH FOUNDATION — THE INSTITUTE for Visual History and Education embarked on a new chapter on Tuesday when it unveiled its new global headquarters on the USC University Park Campus.

The event marked the start of the institute’s 25th anniversary, a time that will propel its work into new frontiers as it continues its mission of sharing the 55,000 testimonies of survivors of the Holocaust and other genocides to foster empathy and respect.

The ceremony was attended by USC Shoah Foundation founder Steven Spielberg, USC interim President Wanda M. Austin and Stephen Smith, the USC Shoah Foundation Finci Viterbi Executive Director, as well as members of the institute’s Board of Councilors and Next Generation Council.

The new office, on the top floor of the Leavey Library, doubles the space available as the institute scales its work to reach more people. For the first time, it offers a lobby with interactive displays about their work with survivor testimony and its impact around the world that the public can visit.

Spielberg praised Smith for his unwavering commitment to the institute’s mission.
“Stephen, I want to thank you for your stewardship, your vision and your dedication,” Spielberg said.

USC Shoah Foundation anniversary: A timely reminder

He then reflected on the recent mass shooting in Pittsburgh.

“The celebration today is dimmed by the atrocities of murder at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh two weeks ago,” he said. “And we have to realize that hate and discrimination, xenophobia, continue to dominate the news cycle. But we can’t let this become the status quo. We cannot ignore it. Because we hear something again and again and again, it doesn’t mean we should accept it as part of the national conversation.”

He said the state of the world has underscored the urgency of the Institute’s mission.

“We need to get into more countries, more museums and more communities,” he said, “because intolerance is creeping up everywhere, and that means we need to be everywhere. We need to stand up to hate everywhere. And this is what our next 25 years will be all about.”

Austin said the university remains devoted to the ideals of the institute and echoed the reflections about the tragedy in Pittsburgh.

“As a university devoted to diversity, we believe in upholding the dignity and respect of every member of our academic community,” she said. “The events in Pittsburgh remind us that anti-Semitism remains a very serious concern across the nation and around the globe. Now, more than ever, we need USC Shoah Foundation to help fight ignorance and to teach tolerance.”

Smith took a moment to read a letter to USC Shoah Foundation from the daughter of Judah Samet, a Holocaust survivor who is a member of the synagogue in Pittsburgh that was targeted Oct. 27 — and missed the massacre by minutes. Samet gave his testimony to USC Shoah Foundation in 1997.

USC Shoah Foundation anniversary: Testimony ‘cracked him open’

“His testimony for the Foundation was the first time I ever heard my father tell his story and in a very significant way, it is what cracked him open,” said his daughter, Elizabeth Samet, in the letter. “ALL of the speaking he does today is built on the fact that he realized then that it was essential for him to bear witness. I cannot thank Mr. Spielberg enough for that gift for our family.”

George Schaeffer, who funded the George and Irina Schaeffer Hall for Genocide Study in the new office, said that the work of the Institute revolves around three words: hate, hope and love.

“Hate is very easy,” he said. “You have Burma, you have Ethiopia, you have Hitler. There are many, many examples in today’s world. To take a civilized Germany in the 1930s and turn it into what it was, that’s hate. Hope is more difficult. Hope you have to work at. Hope is something you need to give in order to turn it into love.”

Donor Melinda Goldrich spoke about her father, the late Holocaust survivor Jona Goldrich, for whom the institute’s new Jona Goldrich Center for Digital Storytelling is named.

“It is hard to believe that it has been 25 years since we were in the home of my sister together with my father, who is now passed, and my mother, listening to him tell his story for the first time to the Shoah Foundation just after the making of Schindler’s List,” she said. “Looking at that — it’s like history in the making.”

The USC Shoah Foundation visitors’ center will be open to the public starting Monday, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.