USC Shoah Foundation’s annual gala

1 (From left to right) Finance executive Mellody Hobson, USC’s 2015 commencement speaker; filmmaker and USC alumnus George Lucas; actress Kate Capshaw; USC Interim President Wanda M. Austin; USC trustee and filmmaker Steven Spielberg; and Rita Wilson and Tom Hanks, the recipients of the Ambassador for Humanity award.

2 Steven Spielberg presented Rita Wilson and Tom Hanks with the Ambassador for Humanity award.

3 Ivy Schamis, recipient of the inaugural Stronger Than Hate Educator Award, joins her students onstage.

4 Melissa Etheridge performed during the gala.

5 Wanda M. Austin and Oprah Winfrey

6 Steven Spielberg with Kate Capshaw and Oprah Winfrey

All photos: Getty Images
IN RECOGNITION OF THEIR LONGSTANDING commitment to humanitarian causes and support of veterans, Rita Wilson and Tom Hanks were presented the Ambassador for Humanity Award by Kate Capshaw and Steven Spielberg, USC trustee and founder of USC Shoah Foundation – The Institute for Visual History and Education.

Comedian Martin Short hosted the event, which featured remarks from special guest Oprah Winfrey and a musical performance from Melissa Etheridge. USC Interim President Wanda M. Austin also shared some remarks.

Receiving special recognition was Ivy Schamis, who accepted the Institute’s inaugural Stronger Than Hate Educator Award by USC Shoah Foundation Finci Viterbi Executive Director Stephen Smith. Schamis was teaching her Holocaust studies class at Marjory Stoneman Douglas on Feb. 14 when a gunman opened fire outside, killing 17 people, including two students in her classroom.

Also honored was a group of aging veterans who helped liberate Nazi concentration camps in Europe at the end of World War II.

Held at the storied Beverly Hilton Hotel, the evening was produced by June Beallor, a Founding Executive Director of USC Shoah Foundation. Beallor established the Ambassadors event for the Institute in 2000 and has produced every year since its inception.

Offering thoughts in turn somber and uplifting – and even humorous – speakers offered their perspective on the work of the Institute. The recent shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh was referenced often. Speaking first, Winfrey named each of the 11 people killed on Oct. 27 – just nine days before the gala – before asking the audience for a moment of silence in their memory.

“Now more than ever before we need the Shoah Foundation and organizations like the Shoah Foundation to give us the strength and to give us the life, to combat what those of us who have some sense can see is darkness upon the face of our earth,” Winfrey said. “Racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, tribalism – they are all alive, but do nothing for our human kind. So we are here tonight to recognize, and to also celebrate those individuals who embody the foundation’s core values.”

Speaking next, Austin, who said the Institute was an integral part of the university, offered support for people who were impacted by the Pittsburgh shooting. “While we can never make sense of senseless acts of violence, we see how times of tragedy reveal the true character of a community,” she said. “We see that actions designed to break us apart ultimately bring us closer together.”

Smith talked about the newer collections added to the Institute’s Visual History Archive, which contains 55,000 testimonies from survivors and witnesses to the Holocaust and other genocides.

“This year we have over 70 people who have experienced the full force of antisemetic hate in our world,” he said, referring to the Institute’s new Countering Antisemitism collection. “We also recorded testimonies of the Rohingya, whose lives have been destroyed by genocidal violence right in front of our eyes. This battle is far from over, but we will dig deeper. We will fight this hatred and this ugliness wherever it’s seen with the powerful voice of these 55,000 testimonies in our archive.”
He then introduced 93-year-old Glenn Felner, a World War II veteran, who spoke about his eagerness to enter the war before he was old enough to enlist. He wound up fighting in the Battle of the Bulge and helped liberate the Buchenwald concentration camp.

“When we broke open the gates, we were confronted with death and destruction inside,” he said. “People were still alive, but mere skeletons in striped uniforms. In broken Yiddish, I could talk with some of the survivors. I felt proud I could be part of their liberation from certain death at the hands of their Nazi captors.”

Smith then introduced Aalayah Eastmond, a student in Schamis’s class at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, who recounted in detail the harrowing ordeal she and her fellow students endured during the school shooting.

“We are learning to rise above adversity thanks to IWitness and Mrs. Schamis,” she said. “Can we eradicate hate? Through this experience and guidance from our teacher, we learned that we can. Together we are stronger than hate.”

Smith then brought Schamis to the podium to present her with the Stronger Than Hate Award.

“There is no one more deserving of this award than Ivy Schamis,” he said. “Not only is she an excellent educator, she is a humanitarian, a counselor, a cheerleader, a stateswoman, a motivational speaker and a leader all rolled into one.”

As she entered, Schamis greeted a group of about 12 of her students who were on the stage. Schamis said that survivors of the Holocaust are heroes for sharing their stories.

“For years, I was in awe of Holocaust survivors,” she said. “I tried and could not fathom what they have been through. Every survivor had a unique experience and so many suffered loss beyond imagination. I think about them daily and feel glad to be with so many tonight. Their will to live, their hope for future generations and their willingness to share their heart-wrenching stories so we can learn from them and keep their lessons alive is remarkable.”

Schamis then talked about how she planned to dissuade the perpetrator from killing more people in her classroom. She never got the chance because he didn’t enter the room.

“I was thinking about what to say should he enter the room,” she said. “I was going to tell him, ‘We love you,’ because I knew it must be someone who had so much hate in his heart and maybe he wouldn’t shoot any more if he thought we loved him.”

After a performance by Etheridge, who sang a song called “Pulse,” about the 2016 shooting at a Florida nightclub, and a searing rendition of the Janis Joplin hit “Piece of My Heart,” Spielberg then took the stage to present Wilson and Hanks with the Ambassador for Humanity Award. He noted many of the causes undertaken by the couple, including veterans affairs, space exploration and advocates for cancer patients.

He began his remarks by quoting Anne Frank, who wrote in her diary that “I keep my ideals because in spite of everything, I believe that people are good at heart.”

“Hope,” he continued. “This is our greatest power. It is one embodied by our Ambassadors for Humanity, tonight’s honorees, a man and woman who are helping to solve today’s greatest riddles, where is the commonality in conversation? How do we speak to each other when we seemingly have nothing we agree on? The Shoah Foundation is one of these answers.”

He then thanked Wilson and Hanks for their dedication to the Institute.

“They have been on this journey with Kate and I from Step One,” he said. “And as we tell our stories to solve these riddles, they are there. When there is need, they are there. Tom and Rita, a dynamic duo in our world of superheroes, just know this: Their superpower is to be human.”

In accepting his award, Hanks spoke patriotically about the United States Constitution and its promise of a more perfect union.

“Rita and I are so honored to be included in the hard work that the Shoah Foundation does, in the divine mission that it has set itself out on and made it real, and in the good fight that we are all here in order to continue on,” he said. “Let us remain allies in that good fight and let us say thank you so much for this night of attention.”

Wilson lauded the survivors who gave their testimonies and thanked them for using their stories to teach the important lessons of empathy and respect.

“In its ongoing work, USC Shoah Foundation tells us what is happening,” she said. “In 2018, is there any better way to invest time and treasure than in connecting the events of the past with the headlines of now? We accept ignorance at our peril and to rationalize is to reap the wind. To stand still in the presence of intolerance is to reap the whirlwind.”

While many tears were shed during the evening, there was also time for laughter. Martin Short was in high form as he teased the dignitaries at the head table.

“This is the highest honor Tom has ever received,” he said, adding, “on a Monday night.”

The Ambassadors for Humanity event is a crucial part of the Institute’s efforts, helping to forge partnerships that sustain the organization into the future. The gala raises much-needed general funds to support its educational programs, including expansion of the Institute’s award-winning IWitness website, professional development for educators globally, the Center for Advanced Genocide Research, academic conferences, expanding access to the Visual History Archive and testimony preservation, and others.