

DHHRM to honor Michael Berenbaum

Renowned Holocaust educator, filmmaker to receive 2025 Hope for Humanity Award Nov. 18

By Deb Silverthorn

“If you build it, they will come,” tagged the 1989 film “Field of Dreams.” The Dallas Memorial Center for Holocaust Studies — now the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum — has done just that, thanks in large part to visionaries like Dr. Michael Berenbaum.

In September, the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum marked six years since it opened in the heart of downtown Dallas. On Nov. 18, the Museum will honor Dr. Michael Berenbaum — whose firm conceptualized the Museum’s permanent exhibition — with its 2025 Hope for Humanity Award at the Hyatt Regency Dallas.

Cocktails begin at 5 p.m., followed by dinner and the program at 7 p.m.

“It is 80 years since the liberation, and we spend every day educating, reminding and making the public aware of the atrocities and getting to know the survivors,” said Mary Pat Higgins, the Museum’s president and CEO. “From around the world, we continue to receive rave reviews of our permanent exhibition, designed by Michael and his Berenbaum Jacobs Associates team. Hiring Michael was hiring the best.”

Professional and lay leaders worked with Berenbaum’s firm for more than six years leading up to the opening of the Museum, planning what the permanent exhibition would be even before hiring, with Berenbaum’s input, the OMNIPLAN architecture firm. Higgins said the collaboration was built on a shared vision that gave the Museum its distinctive sense of purpose.

“We built the Museum from the inside out to ensure the building supported the permanent exhibition,” she said. “They then worked hand in glove with the architects to create what is such an incredible place.”

Berenbaum, DHHRM’s exhibition project director, said the process was a true collaboration between his firm and the Dallas community. “What you have in the Museum is something unique, and it has



Mary Pat Higgins, president and CEO of the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum, tours the museum with Dr. Michael Berenbaum during a recent visit. Berenbaum will receive the 2025 Hope for Humanity Award Nov. 18 at the Hyatt Regency Dallas.

Photo: Courtesy DHHRM

always been a pleasure working with your team,” he said. “They’ve done everything right.

“Form follows function. This was an interesting, exciting and provocative task for which we had complete responsibility.”

That philosophy guided every decision, from exhibition design to field research. In 2015, Berenbaum took Higgins and several of DHHRM’s board leaders on a trip to Belgium, Poland and Germany to visit

historical sites including Auschwitz, Belzec, Birkenau, Majdanek and Treblinka.

“The trip was significant because it made for better clients who became educated because they knew what we were responsible for,” said Berenbaum. “We had the opportunity to stretch our capacity and understanding and, in the Museum, I believe we’ve achieved something we hadn’t done before and did so to the best

of our abilities.”

The project was deeply personal for Berenbaum, whose own background reflects the resilience he has spent his life chronicling.

A New Jersey native, Berenbaum was raised by parents who had immigrated to the United States as infants before World War II. He attended Hebrew day schools and a synagogue with

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Lee Michaels speaks at the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum’s December 2024 Hope for Humanity dinner at the Omni Dallas Hotel.

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primarily Belgian and German immigrants.

“The grandparents spoke Yiddish, our parents responded in English, and for us,” he said, “we were to try to make up for the world that was destroyed.”

Berenbaum is director of the Sigi Ziering Institute and a distinguished professor of Jewish Studies at American Jewish University. The author and editor of 24 books, he was also the executive editor of the “Encyclopedia Judaica” (2nd edition), project director overseeing the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the first director of its Research Institute.

He served as president and CEO of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which collected testimony from 52,000 Holocaust survivors in 32 languages across 57 countries. His film work includes the Academy, Emmy and CableACE award-winning “One Survivor Remembers: The Gerda Weissmann Klein Story,” for which he was a co-producer, and the Oscar-winning documentary “The Last Days,” on which he was a consultant.

Ann and Nate Levine are honorary chairs of the evening, and Barbi and Scott Cohen and Catherine and Sam L. Susser are co-chairs.

“Dr. Berenbaum’s impact is unparalleled here and around the globe,” said Scott Cohen, whose uncle Steve Waldman is a former DHHRM board chair. “We’re thrilled to honor him and the profound way he’s helped us continue the Museum’s mission.”

“It’s meaningful for Barbi and

me to co-chair this event; we each have memories of visiting the Museum even from its days at the JCC and, together as longtime supporters,” said Cohen, “to share this role with Catherine and Sam, who has been a mentor to me for years, is very special.”

In 2025, DHHRM will have reached 280,000 youth in person, through virtual visits, teacher curriculum and classroom visits by DHHRM staff. In partnership with other agencies, the Museum’s faculty works with local school districts as a resource to address the contentious issues of antisemitism.

The Museum also works with second-generation survivors to continue telling their families’ stories.

“We are honored to have the testimonies and some of the personal effects of so many of our community’s survivors — truly treasures,” said Higgins. “Sadly, each year we lose some of these precious people, and it’s important to keep telling their stories.”

Photo: DHHRM

Dr. Michael Berenbaum speaks with Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum leaders at Treblinka during a 2015 board trip to historical Holocaust sites.

The Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum, said Berenbaum, “shows what a collaborative effort can be. To be honored years later means they respect the work.”

“We created something in Dallas that has something to say at this moment in time — even more on target than at its creation,” he added.

As the Museum continues to educate and inspire, Berenbaum’s words echo its mission.

“If you live life forward, it’s understood backwards,” said Berenbaum, paraphrasing Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. “We were the generation to make up for a lost generation, and my whole career has been to tell the story that couldn’t be told, and for survivors to tell their stories for immortality.”

For more information, to purchase tickets for the Nov. 18 event — with a kosher dinner catered by Gourmet Palate — or to make a donation, visit tinyurl.com/DHHRM-Hope or call 469-399-5202.

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