American Nazis protested a Holocaust remembrance event. A university's scholarship is part of the reason why.

CNN, May 11, 2019

For the past five years, Joyce Griffis and Congregation Chaim B'Derech have held a Holocaust March for Remembrance in Russellville, Arkansas. It's always been solemn and peaceful.

This year's march was supposed to be like all the others; attendees would march down Main Street, listen to speeches and offer prayers to commemorate and remember the 6 million Jews murdered by the Nazis during World War II.

Except white supremacists showed up holding Nazi flags, marching down an otherwise deserted sidewalk and signs that read, "The Holocaust didn't happen but it should have," while screaming references to Holocaust victims as "your imaginary 6 million."

The white supremacists carried crosses -- at least one was stained red -- alongside a picture of Jesus.

About 10 to 15 protesters tried to disrupt the event; they were outnumbered by the roughly 50 people attending the Holocaust Remembrance march.

They marched for Holocaust victims but were flanked by Nazi flags

Griffis said she had heard rumors that her event in remembrance of Holocaust victims would be protested by white supremacists. Two days before the event, the rumor became reality -- the police chief in Russellville, some 77 miles northwest of Little Rock, called telling her there would be protesters while she and others gathered to remember.

Arkansas State Police troopers escorted the remembrance marchers as they made their way through the roughly half-mile route around the center of Russellville.
As they marched, the white supremacist group followed with Nazi flags and placards in hand. Amateur video from the march shows one protester flashing a white power hand sign.

CNN sent protest organizer Billy Roper a number of questions in the days after the protest, but he has not responded. On his blog, he says he organized his group to protest what he called an "anti-Christian Holocaust Remembrance March."

Protesters tried to shout down Jewish WWII vet

Returning to the event's main stage, the speeches Griffis had organized began as the protesters' yelling continued.

Beryl Wolfson, 96, a Jewish WWII veteran, was first to speak. He saw the horrors of the Holocaust directly as he helped liberate the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau in Germany.

"We opened up the boxcars and there were bodies of men, women and children stacked up in those boxcars," Wolfson said slowly, recounting his experience.

As he spoke on Sunday, protesters holding flags emblazoned with the same Nazi swastika as the banners he had helped tear down decades earlier tried to interrupt his speech with shouts and megaphones.

They called the next speaker, Arkansas Tech University English professor Sarah Stein, out by name.

"I have never had an experience like that, but I knew that I had to speak for my people and for all people who white supremacists would wish to oppress or destroy altogether," she told CNN later. "I stood up to them for the same reason I'm standing against the scholarship at my university."

Arkansas Tech scholarship controversy is part of white supremacist protest

The scholarship that Stein referred to was the focal point of Roper's call for others of a like mind to join him in marching, shouting and sloganeering against the Holocaust remembrance group.
Controversy over the new scholarship at Arkansas Tech University in Russellville named for a now-deceased professor, Michael Link, has grown into a groundswell of opposition from the Anti-Defamation League and Jewish leaders.

Link purportedly taught that Holocaust denial is a valid historical viewpoint. time, Robert Brown, from James Moses, a history professor at the school. The letter accuses Link of assigning materials during a graduate seminar that said that the Holocaust never happened.

CNN has obtained a 2005 confidential letter sent to the university president at the

In an email to CNN, Moses confirmed he wrote the letter. Although Moses said he didn't know Link's intent with the assignment when he sent the letter, he assumed the worst and he wanted to get the administration's attention so they'd "derail" the seminar.

Moses told CNN that when Link was confronted, he "denied any attempt to deny the Holocaust," and instead claimed he was trying to "offer the widest possible range of views on the event."

The administration was "not satisfied" with Link's explanation, according to Moses, so it took action. He says that Link was "disciplined in as severe a means as was available short of his firing."

Moses says Link -- who was tenured at the time -- was removed from the graduate faculty and barred from teaching any courses the following semester.

The graduate seminar did continue, but the Holocaust was removed as a topic and the disturbing reading material was removed from the course, according to Moses.

The university refused to confirm that Link was disciplined following the letter, saying it doesn't confirm, deny or comment on personnel disciplinary matters.

Moses stressed this was the only accusation against Link he knows of. He said he believes Link's intent in 2005 was "probably" to present Holocaust denial as a legitimate, "valid historical viewpoint."
Current university president Robin E. Bowen told CNN in a statement that the university does not condone teaching anti-Semitism or Holocaust denial.

"Multiple generations of Arkansas Tech University students learned history from Dr. Michael Link," the university said in a statement announcing the scholarship for the professor who taught for 51 years until his death in 2016. "Provisions in his will and estate plan have ensured that his influence at ATU will continue well into the future."

And so a scholarship bearing Link's name will be awarded annually to a senior history major who has financial need.

That's why Sarah Stein is helping lead the fight against the scholarship, and why Roper and his men singled her out as she spoke at the Holocaust remembrance.

University says it will keep the scholarship

Arkansas Tech has come under increased pressure after the Anti-Defamation League, state Jewish leaders and more than 40 Holocaust scholars wrote a letter on April 18 to the university, asking that school officials reconsider the scholarship, which has yet to be awarded.

The 2005 letter and Link's own writing were cited in that letter.

Student protesters also have demanded the university to reverse its decision, according to CNN affiliate KLRT.

"Accurately assessing the entirety of another person's life after it is complete is a difficult, and perhaps impossible, task," Bowen told CNN in a statement. "We have taken the concerns seriously and have reviewed the evidence at hand. Through our process, we have not found evidence supporting the claims against the late Dr. Michael Link."

There are no plans to return the funds, the university says, and the name of the scholarship will remain.