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WWII Museum opens Hall of Democracy; new facility will be center of distance-learning programs

BY JOHN POPE | CONTRIBUTING WRITER

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The research library in the new Hall of Democracy building at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans on Monday, October 14, 2019.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER



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In the 19 years since its star-spangled opening, the National World War II Museum has become one of New Orleans' premier tourist attractions, drawing more than 7.5 million visitors. But its latest addition, a \$25 million building to be dedicated Thursday, was erected with an eye toward people who may never set foot on the Warehouse District campus.

The Hall of Democracy, which will serve as a hub for the museum's distance-learning programs, is hardly off-limits to visitors. Its ground floor has a gift shop and a 3,764-square-foot area for temporary exhibits.

Occupying that space until Jan. 5 is "Operation Finale: The Capture & Trial of Adolf Eichmann," which chronicles the process that tracked down the Holocaust mastermind and brought him to justice.



BY DAN SWENSON | GRAPHICS
EDITOR

But the other two floors of the three-story building are given over to studios for making videos and podcasts, a library, offices, and a room filled with shelf upon shelf of blinking computer gear.

“It is pretty cool,” Gemma Birnbaum said. As the museum’s associate vice president for its Media and Education Center, she presides over a high-tech realm dedicated to producing videos, documentaries, podcasts and other programs for colleges, high schools and even juvenile detention centers.



A display of the Israeli secret operatives who helped capture Adolf Eichmann. The new Hall of Democracy building at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans on Monday, October 14, 2019. A traveling exhibit called “Operation Finale: The Capture & Trial of Adolf Eichmann” is on display till January.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

The museum's expanded capacity can make these programs "more visually compelling," said Stephen J. Watson, its president and CEO. "It can give students from other parts of the country the immersive experience that comes close to what you see in the galleries."

Voorsanger Mathes LLC was the lead architect for the new building and the rest of the museum complex. Project contractors for the Hall of Democracy were Boh Bros. Construction Co. and Roy Anderson Corp.

But even though the Hall of Democracy is new, the museum's distance education programs are not. Birnbaum said they were introduced shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005.



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"Last year, we reached about 170,000 kids through distance-learning programs, from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, plus 11 countries," she said, even though "our former ... center was a closet."

This part of the museum will also produce material for the master's degree program in World War II studies that the museum operates in partnership with Arizona State University. The museum picked that institution because of its experience in producing online higher-education programs, Watson said.

The online program has 130 students, Birnbaum said, with its first group of graduates finishing in a year.



An interactive display showing photos of Nazis and what they looked like when they were involved with the Holocaust is compared to photos of the same people and what they looked like later in life. The new Hall of Democracy building at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans on Monday, October 14, 2019. A traveling exhibit called "Operation Finale: The Capture & Trial of Adolf Eichmann" is on display till January.

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Having a sophisticated technological capacity is vital for a museum to survive and thrive in an era when people depend on their smartphones and laptops, she said.

With the new space in the Hall of Democracy for all these activities came more employees — 18 full-time staffers now, Birnbaum said, up from six two years ago.

“What the Hall of Democracy represents is a commitment to expand our program, expand educational outreach and bring World War II to

new audiences,” she said. “It represents a deepening of our bench of experts (and) ... lets us expand our footprint in higher education.”

Although the emphasis at the Hall of Democracy is on high-tech educational enhancements, the building also contains rooms for meetings and classes, as well as a library that will have about 22,000 volumes.



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The library's holdings — on shelves and online — will let staffers answer what is the most frequent question museum researchers get: What did my relative do in World War II?

The process starts on the museum's website. For a fee of \$75 and up, staffers can get to work, navigating through what can be intimidating bureaucracies, and uncover not only what that relative did but also the context in which that person worked, said Watson.

The museum has fielded hundreds of such inquiries since this program was launched, he said: "It's very powerful to sit down with a family and present (their relative's) service records and why it was important."



A display of the bullet proof seating area that Adolf Eichmann, left, sat in during his trial. The new Hall of Democracy building at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans on Monday, October 14, 2019. A traveling exhibit called "Operation Finale: The Capture & Trial of Adolf Eichmann" is on display till January.

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Some windows in the Hall of Democracy look out on the spot where the Liberation Pavilion, the last addition to the museum's complex, will rise.

A groundbreaking ceremony for that building will also be held Thursday. Scheduled for completion in 2021, it will cover such topics as the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, service members' re-entry to civilian life and the Marshall Plan, which helped rebuild Western Europe after the war.

"The Liberation Pavilion gets to the heart of our mission," Watson said, explaining that the museum exists to pose and answer these questions: "Why did we fight? How did we win? And what does it mean today?"

Even though the opening of the Liberation Pavilion is two years off, Watson said he and his colleagues are already thinking about what to do when the museum complex is complete.

"We have more work to do to teach about World War II throughout the country," he said. "We're going through a planning process to think about how we can continue to be great stewards of what we've built."



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