

THE Maven

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JEWS, POLES, UNDERSTANDING...

■ Jews might have a fraught history with Poland, but that's not what Chicago attorney **Michael Rosenbaum** focuses on in a non-profit organization he started in 2007.

In fact, Rosenbaum has been so successful in promoting healthy Polish-Jewish relationships that earlier this year the president of Poland honored him along with his Polish partners.

Rosenbaum's organization is **Friends of the Forum**, designed to support what he calls "Polish-Jewish reconciliation." It works primarily with a Warsaw-based organization called the **Forum for Dialogue**, which partners with schools and educators across Poland promoting Polish/Jewish dialogue through educational programs, publications, forums and interchanges between Polish and Jewish students.

Its main task is "to reconnect Jews and Poles with our shared history in a way that can build for the future," Rosenbaum, who has been doing this kind of work for more than 15 years, said in a recent phone conversation.

The flagship program, **School of Dialogue**, trains 40 Polish educators every year. "They go out to what were mostly shtetl towns to teach students about the history of their own towns," Rosenbaum says. The program, which is under the honorary patronage of the Polish president, has been in more than 200 towns throughout Poland. At the end of the year, schools compete for national awards, Rosenbaum says.

"It's a unique organization," he says. "From the grass roots in the tiniest towns in Poland to the top of the nation's hierarchy in Warsaw they have found a way to create a network of supportive, interested people who are very much engaged in Polish-Jewish relations."

Rosenbaum became involved with Friends of the Forum after he returned from a 2006 exchange visit to Poland hosted by the forum.

"I was very impressed both by their approach to reconciliation and by the bright young Poles who were joining with the founder to build a new chapter between Poles and Jews," he says.

When he came back from that trip, he started a support group to connect American Jews both to the Forum and to



Jacek Michalowski, Chief of Chancellery to President Bronislaw Komorowski, presents Poland's Order of Merit to Chicagoan Michael Rosenbaum. (Photo: Brenna Cukier.)

their own family histories. A number of supporters have now visited their families' home towns in Poland and connected with the students in the program, mostly high school age but some in middle school.

"The School of Dialogue is not a Holocaust studies program nor a tolerance program, but by having these students discover the history of their home towns they become very sensitive to the Holocaust, more civic minded, more accepting of the other," Rosenbaum says. "It's a very impressive thing to see how these students get a different understanding of the world and of Jewish history."

All the programs look to the future, Rosenbaum says. Friends of the Forum "is not a genealogy group that wants to trace the past. Its interest is in creating connections for the future. Poland is an ally for the United States and Israel, a very important one on a government level. The forum strengthens relationships on a grassroots level," he says.

While the connection between Jews and Poles was badly damaged by the Holocaust and 45 years of Communist rule, Rosenbaum says, it's impossible to understand Polish history without Jews. Younger Poles are learning this lesson.

"The approach the Forum takes by bringing in its own educators is a much more facilitated type of learning," Rosenbaum says. "It is not just the educational projects but the fact that the students take ownership, and as a rule they end up getting much more involved and committed" than in conventional learning models.

In one town, for instance, students decided they didn't want the program to end so they taught its lessons to the next generation.

"It has really made an impact, not just in large towns but

in smaller towns that might have had no connection to Jews at all today except for this," Rosenbaum says.

Now another part of the program, called **Leaders of Dialogue**, enlists adults doing reconciliation work in their own towns, creating classes, monuments and other kinds of connections in former shtetl towns that were largely Jewish before the Holocaust.

"We're working to build a productive future," Rosenbaum says. "We want to carry forward that awareness as students move out onto the world as young adults, and the results have been remarkable."

Pauline Dubkin Yearwood

Corrections: 1) The 2015 awards program, not the entire School of Dialogue, was conducted under the honorary patronage of the President of Poland. 2) Michael Rosenbaum is not an attorney.

For more information about Friends of the Forum and Polish/Jewish dialogue, please visit www.friendsoftheforum.org