



Pieter Kohnstam and his wife, Susan, are being recognized for their humanitarian work.

VENICE — An 83-year-old Venice resident is reluctantly about to accept an honor dedicated to the memory of his babysitter — Holocaust victim Anne Frank.

In conjunction with what would've been Frank's 90th birthday on June 12, Pieter Kohnstam and his wife, Susan, are both being recognized for their humanitarian work by the Anne Frank Center (AFC) for Mutual Respect. It's called the Legacy of Hope Award, and as AFC Chief Operating Officer Elisa Rapaport reports, it took some convincing to get the Kohnstams to say yes.

"We wanted to honor them last year, but they had declined to accept an acknowledgment," says Rapaport. "This is actually a common reaction. So many people we want to single out are very humble, and I think they felt they weren't worthy of this distinction. But I can't imagine anyone who is more than they are."

Last week, the Kohnstams were in Amsterdam, where Pieter and Anne, seven years older, were accidental neighbors during the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands. Their families had escaped Germany separately, and wound up by coincidence at the same apartment building in the Dutch capital. For two years, Pieter and his precocious upstairs neighbor became playmates — she looked after him when his parents were busy — before the Nazis broke things up in 1942 and ordered the families to gather for deportation to relocation camps.

The Kohnstams would take a circuitous route to sanctuary in Argentina. The Franks would take their chances in hiding for the next two years before their luck ran out and the family was discovered by the Gestapo. Anne and her sister Margot would perish at Bergen-Belsen's death camp in early 1945. But what she left behind was a diary that would attain immortality for its unwavering faith in the decency of human nature, despite her having witnessed its blackest elements.

The AFC originated in New York in 1959, and it sponsors workshops on subjects as diverse as cultural awareness, anti-bullying and creativity.

Pieter would publish his own survival story, "A Chance to Live," in 2006. And he has been speaking out against anti-Semitism, racism, and all other forms of discrimination ever since. Unfortunately, national and world events have been keeping him busy.

Among AFC's citation categories is the Interfaith Unity Award. This year's honorees are the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where a white supremacist murdered nine parishioners in 2015, the Pittsburgh Tree of Life synagogue, which lost 11 members to mass shooting in October, and Linwood & Al Noor Masjids mosque, host to a slaughter that claimed 51 lives in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March.

"After the Pittsburgh shooting, one of the first people Rabbi (Jeffrey) Myers heard from was (Emanuel AME) Reverend Eric Manning in Charleston," says Rapaport. "He reached out and said our people in our congregation know what you're going through, and we're here for you. They've become great friends and they've been doing speaking engagements together. I get chills when I think about that unity and that solidarity.

"Sadly," she continues, "we could've added more since that time because this keeps happening."

The most recent aberration to show up on Rapaport's radar is Alabama's Mark Chambers, mayor of Carbon Hill, population 1,928. Last week, in a Facebook note to a constituent complaint about gays and lesbians, Chambers wrote "The only way to change it is to kill the problem out. I know it's bad to say, but without killing them out, there's no way to fix it."

"This is an elected official, and we're seeing stories like these every day," says Rapaport. "This hate-filled, us-versus-them rhetoric has gotten out of control, and we're doing our best to educate younger generations so they know they can do better than this."

Pieter Kohnstam initially never mentioned the Holocaust after arriving in America. But in 1980, he was emotionally transported back to occupied Holland after vandals spray-painted swastikas on his family's cars and driveway in New Jersey. When the community rabbi — whose house was targeted as well — failed to stand up, Kohnstam said it nudged him into public life.

[As he told the Herald-Tribune in 2016](#), "That got me out of the closet."

The Kohnstams attended the Spirit of Anne Frank Awards ceremonies Monday, June 17 in New York.