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MATTHEW CAVANAUGH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

UMass Amherst Professor James Young heads the Holocaust Institute.

By **Matt Rocheleau**

AMHERST — When it opened in spring 2011, a University of Massachusetts Amherst institute for research and remembrance of the Holocaust was envisioned as “an educational treasure,” and by many accounts, it has thrived.

There have been dozens of lectures by prominent scholars and survivors, and thousands of high school and college students have visited to learn about the horrors of genocide from the institute’s array of rare, treasured heirlooms donated by victims and their families. The collections are housed in an old Tudor-style house at the edge of campus, which was bought by an anonymous local resident and donated for just \$1 a year.

But this fall, a for-sale sign abruptly appeared on the front lawn, even as the institute continued to host events, sparking curiosity and concern among donors, guests, and passersby. Word trickled out that the benefactor, businessman Joseph F. Bohan III, had reneged on his promise to make a gift of the property after suffering financial setbacks and personal misfortune.

Officials at the Institute for Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies say a new group of philanthropists is poised to step in this month to save the property and say the institute itself was never in danger of closing. But the upheaval has stirred unease among some donors and others with ties to the institute, who felt blindsided by the news and who worry about the fate of the Holocaust-themed books, paintings, photographs, and rare documents.

Joanne Jaffe, who gave the institute 10 Holocaust- and war-themed oil paintings made by her late father, called Bohan’s decision to sell the center’s home a “radical” move.

“I think it was preemptive to put the house on the market,” said Jaffe, 72, of Los Angeles.

Still, like many other donors, she said she sympathizes with Bohan and has faith in the center’s leadership.

“I’m very glad the issue is being resolved,” she said. “It is important that we remember.”

The institute was born amid adversity. The centerpiece of its collection, an exhibit titled “A Reason to Remember” — which traces the stories of Jewish families in the small village of Roth, Germany, when the country was under Nazi rule — previously was housed at the Hatikvah Holocaust Education Center in Springfield. But in 2010, that center closed because of a lack of funding.



UMass Amherst professor James E. Young, a renowned scholar of Holocaust and memory studies, helped secure a deal to have the exhibit donated to the university.

But to do so, Young first had to prove to the leadership of the shuttered Springfield center that he would give the exhibit a proper home. So he turned to his longtime friend Bohan.

Bohan, a 57-year-old pharmaceutical industry executive who started his own company in 2006, has done well for himself financially. So when Young approached him about starting a Holocaust remembrance institute that could house the Roth exhibit, Bohan agreed to help.



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Officials at the Institute for Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies say the institute itself was never in danger of closing.

Bohan said he knew of a space that might work: a two-story, 3,700-square-foot house that had just gone on the market along the northeast edge of campus.

Bohan bought the building and its half-acre lot for \$439,000, took out a \$351,000 mortgage, and said he would donate it to the institute for just \$1 a year. The institute agreed to pay about \$2,200 a month for upgrades and maintenance.

But in 2013, about two years after the institute opened, Bohan said, his wife became ill and product launches at

his fledgling biopharmaceutical company stalled.

“I stopped everything to take care of my wife. I just had too much on my plate,” he said in a recent interview.

The institute “came up with a creative way to pay the expenses for me,” he added. “I had no problem holding onto the property for a while.”

While the institute is considered to be a part of UMass — the university provides some funding and administrative oversight and helps raise funds — Young, as the institute’s director, is in charge of running the operation.

The institute began paying Bohan rent of \$5,000 per month to cover the mortgage, taxes, utilities, repairs, and other upkeep of the house at 758 North Pleasant St. Bohan said he broke even, at best, on the arrangement but never profited.

Meanwhile, Young and other university officials began to search for a new buyer. And, the institute’s programming thrived.

Still, to help cover the increasing cost of rent and property upkeep, UMass had to chip in more and more each year for the institute to break even, according to budgetary documents for the institute. The university’s contribution rose from around \$2,000 in 2011 and 2012 to \$9,500 the following year and \$25,000 this past year.

This past summer, the institute informed Bohan it did not want to extend its lease, which is due to expire Jan. 31, and the hunt for new donors intensified. Then the for-sale sign went up, sparking concern that the institute was in serious financial trouble and even in danger of closing.

Arnold Friedmann, 89, a Holocaust survivor and retired UMass professor who lectures occasionally at the institute, called the sign “an embarrassment” and “a great pity.”

But Young said in a recent interview at the center: “The institute itself was never in jeopardy.”

The turmoil and uncertainty surrounding the house was largely kept under wraps. Even numerous UMass faculty who belong to an institute advisory committee told the Globe they were unaware of any issues with the institute.

Young said the institute did not make announcements about the situation for fear of scuttling negotiations with potential donors.

Ken Schoen, who owns a shop in South Deerfield that specializes in Judaica and which donated a batch of Holocaust-related books to the institute, said he was delighted to learn that the institute will probably find new benefactors.

“It’s very important that it be sustained and maintained,” said Schoen, whose wife, Jane Trigere, was director of the Hatikvah center.

Bohan, Young, and university officials alike say a new group of four donors, who wish to remain anonymous, are poised to finalize a deal to buy the property and then formally gift it to the university, for the institute's use. The sale of the house is scheduled to close around Friday.

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Correction: An earlier version of this story imprecisely described donors' plans for the institute building.

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