‘Bittersweet’ film on local Holocaust survivors honored

By Lona O’Connor

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It’s just a short film — 13 minutes — but it means the world to Nancy Dershaw.

“It’s such a bittersweet DVD, because my mom passed away in January,” said Dershaw, founder of Next Generations, a Boca Raton-based organization for the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, dedicated to honoring their suffering and preventing genocides and crimes against human rights.

So when Life After the Holocaust: Survivors Rebuild Their Lives won a Telly award, it made it all the sweeter.

The Telly awards go to the best commercial and non-commercial videos of the year. Life After the Holocaust won a bronze award this summer. The video, which cost $7,000 to produce, was produced by Next Generations.

The film provides a link between the end of the Holocaust and the present, showing how people regained their vitality in the years following the end of World War II. Many people tried to go back to their homes, only to find that they were no longer there or living conditions were unsafe. They headed to the displaced-persons camps, as they were called, many of which were in the American occupation zone in Germany.

The film traces the lives of four Palm Beach County Holocaust survivors after the liberation of the concentration camps, interspersing World War II era photos with recent reminiscences by the survivors. Samuel Ron, Ida Mandelbaum Lederman, Morris Friedbaum and Dershaw’s mother, Esther Stengel Mandel, recounted their experiences.

With no homes to return to, many spent months or years rebuilding their lives in displaced-persons camps. First, they had to regain their health. But soon they were dancing and singing, falling in love and having children, some of whom were born in the camps. They went on to immigrate to the United States, Israel and dozens of countries around the world. An estimated 22 million people in Europe became displaced persons after the war.
It was not until the end of her life that Mandel began to talk to her children about her experiences.

“You didn’t see the light, you didn’t see nothing,” said Mandel. “You’re afraid every time that they are going to take you away, they’re going to kill you. I saw people die. I wished every time I would be dead.”

Then her face crumples in grief, the fear as fresh as ever.

“It was the guilt — she felt guilty for living,” explained Dershaw. “When she said she wished she would have died, that did it to me.”

Rose Gatens, director of the Center for Holocaust and Human Rights Education at Florida Atlantic University, researched, collected archival photos and conducted some of the interviews.

“Everybody thinks that on the day of liberation, life begins again,” said Gatens, whose program trains K-12 educators how to incorporate Holocaust education into their curricula. “But the day after liberation, they realized they were all alone. They were scared and didn’t know what to expect.”

Next Generations members have a special role, living with the feelings of their parents, often without any explanation, said Dershaw. “The ones that didn’t want to speak about it, they didn’t want their children to go through the pain. But we knew, because of the eyes, I say to my kids.”

Dershaw’s older sister was born in a displaced-persons camp, and though Dershaw was born in the United States, she was sensitive about the differences between her family and other people.

“I didn’t understand it,” said Dershaw. “Everybody else was a normal American, they went to Brownies. I worked at the age of eight, I helped my dad in his clothing store in New Jersey. That was my ‘Brownies.’ My first language was Yiddish. Now I know how lucky I was to have this time with my dad.”

Some children of survivors have a great deal of anger and resentment to work through, but most of those in Next Generations focus on “the triumph and resilience of our parents,” Dershaw said.