

Zane Buzby - 'One Foot in Comedy, One Foot in the Holocaust'

by Steve Karras

"We are living in a unique moment in time. A tipping point. We are witness to the last generation of Holocaust survivors, and we are the last generation to have the opportunity and the honor to help them. These are people who endured the darkest days of human history, and they are out there right now – still suffering over 75 years after the start of the War. Where is the mass movement to help them? Right now, people who survived the Holocaust are unable to keep on surviving without our help. Future generations will look back at this time and be shocked that there were still Holocaust survivors suffering. And we will say, 'Yes, there were, but when we found out about it, we helped.'" -- Statement by Zane Buzby, founder of [The Survivor Mitzvah Project](#).



CNN named Buzby a CNN HERO for her tireless philanthropic work, which has unequivocally now become her life's work. Born in New York, Buzby came to Hollywood in the mid-'70s as an actor, appearing in the cult classics *Up In Smoke*, *This Is Spinal Tap* and then transitioned to full-time comedy directing, amassing hundreds of credits on shows like *Golden Girls*, *Newhart* and *Married with Children*.

Above: As the zonked out groupie in Cheech & Chong's UP IN SMOKE

Her rendezvous with destiny came in 2001 after wrapping a TV pilot, when she decided to spend her 10-day vacation searching for her grandparents' villages in Lithuania and Belarus. Arriving in Lithuania she encountered Brooklyn-born Professor Dovid Katz, who asked Buzby to visit 8 elderly Holocaust survivors he knew and bring them food, medicine and American dollars when she ventured across the border into Belarus. For Buzby this trip was life-changing and left her with, "One foot in comedy, one foot in the Holocaust."

Fate first led Buzby to the doorstep of the dilapidated hut of 80-year-old Zeydl Katz in Belarus, who was hunched over digging potatoes out of the earth, so he would have a meager winter food supply. From out of nowhere he heard Zane's unexpected, but most warm greeting: "Shalom Aleichem." From that encounter, as well as several others, grew friendships and meaningful correspondence which gave Buzby a renewed sense of purpose. She was compelled to help, making numerous expeditions overseas to bring thousands of American dollars to survivors and seek out and identify more survivors in need. And always, Buzby recorded every encounter with a survivor on videotape, also filming a vanishing world: the Partisan bunkers in the forests, the old wooden Synagogues barely standing, the unmarked killing fields, and the numerous empty villages once vibrant centers of Jewish life -- which are now literally ghost towns. She has amassed a unique Holocaust video archive of hundreds of hours of never before recorded material.



Buzby and Noam Osband film synagogue ruins - Ostrog, Ukraine

There is no shortage of Holocaust memorials, museums and foundations dedicated solely to preserving the history of Nazi crimes against Europe's Jews during the Second World War. Yet there *is* a shortage of funds for financial aid for survivors. *The Survivor Mitzvah Project* is the only organization providing immediate, direct and continuous financial aid for survivors in Eastern Europe who have no other life-line. There in the shadow of the world's monuments memorializing the 6 million exterminated Jews of Europe, are thousands of ill and elderly Holocaust survivors living out their final years in Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Ukraine and Russia, in desperate need of financial assistance. *Below: Tzilye K, Ukraine*

"The Survivor Mitzvah Project will go down in history as having fulfilled a beautiful and angelic role..." said human rights activist and Yiddish scholar Dovid Katz who founded the Yiddish Studies program at Oxford, the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, and now is the head of DefendingHistory.com."



The Survivor Mitzvah Project helps support and corresponds with an expanding roster of elderly survivors. A chance encounter with Los Angeles-based philanthropist and Yiddish enthusiast, Chic Wolk, resulted in a generous contribution, which jump-started the project and helped it expand. Currently, the SMP helps over 2,000 elderly survivors in eight countries and is still growing as more survivors are identified on Buzby's expeditions through Eastern Europe. And every penny donated goes directly into the hands of an elderly survivor in need. Buzby calls the survivors the 'Unluckiest Generation.'

"The oldest of them experienced the Russian Revolution and WWI as children -- civil war, evacuations, wide-spread violence of pogroms, the enforced famines of the '30s, the rise of Nazism, and the full-blown Holocaust. And if they survived that then came the Stalinist purges, Chernobyl and Perestroika. Every decade a litany of horror and heartbreak, leaving them penniless and without hope." "Jewish survivors in the East had it worse," Katz told us. "Their civilization had been destroyed in the worst genocide in human history and they now found themselves in countries that forbade free expression of their religion, their culture, their language... And on a more personal level, the survivors had most often lost their close relatives, leaving them lifelong mourners bereft of the usual networks of extended families and circles."

"This is a project about doing the right thing, while there is still time," says Buzby. "We have become their families. Everyday we find more survivors in need, yet we do not have the funds to help all who are suffering. Many elderly survivors are out there alone and ill, just waiting for help that may never come. We are hoping, as more people learn about the plight of the survivors, people will donate generously at survivormitzvah.org."

All donations large and small are lifesaving. \$150 per month helps one survivor, so the goal is to raise \$2.5 million every year for the next 10 years. "To truly make a difference, we need everyone to help. In 1939 the world turned its back on these people, but today we can all be rescuers. This is an opportunity to actually do something about the Holocaust," says Buzby.



Buzby calls upon her show business background to raise additional funds. *The Stars Come Out For Survivors*, a fundraising event filmed at the Museum of Tolerance, included a stunning array of musicians and legendary Hollywood actors -- Ed Asner, Frances Fisher, Elliott Gould, Valerie Harper, Lainie Kazan -- who read letters the survivor's have written to Buzby -- words of thanks -- and stories of their Holocaust experiences, combined with footage of the survivors from Zane's humanitarian expeditions.

Buzby leaves us with this thought, "If righting a wrong is something that interests you, if you want to bring friendship and hope to people who live in poverty and despair, if you'd like to save a life with a simple click and help write a more hopeful final chapter to the

Holocaust, one of kindness and compassion -- donate to [The Survivor Mitzvah Project](http://TheSurvivorMitzvahProject). You can make a difference."

Donate online: survivormitzvah.org. Or Send a check to: **THE SURVIVOR MITZVAH PROJECT**
2658 Griffith Park Blvd. Ste. #299
Los Angeles, CA 90039

800-905-6160 • 213-622-5050