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Genocide survivor tells Stevenson students about horror in Rwanda | PAGE 6

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THURSDAY, MARCH 20, 2014 | LSR

STEVENSON HIGH SCHOOL

Genocide survivor asks students to listen, tell his story

BY BONNIE WACHTER
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The story is hard to explain. Not just because Emmanuel Habimana's tale carries heavy emotional weight, but because of the subject matter. Habimana, a native of Rwanda, came to Stevenson High School on March 18 to talk about one of the worst genocides in human history. "What happened, it's something else, it's unimaginable," Habimana told his student audience. "I don't know how to describe it, because it's inhuman."

Habimana gave three presentations at Stevenson, talking about the horror that his homeland became in 1994. He urged hundreds of Patriots to learn from his losses. Born into the Tutsi tribe, he was 9 years old when Rwanda's Hutu tribe began slaughtering the Tutsis. The Hutu plan, as he described it, was to make sure that the outside world never heard about what happened.

"Leave no one to tell the story," Habimana explained.

He stopped at Stevenson amidst a Chicago-area tour of schools, including Carmel Catholic, Mundelein, Glenbrook North and Highland Park high schools. Habimana is codirector of the 2010 documentary "Komora (To Heal)," a project the National Geographic Society sponsored to help tell the story of the horrific events that were supposed to be lost to history.

"When the story's not told, the same things keep happening and happening and happening," he said.

The Stevenson High School Foundation helped organize Habimana's appearance, with assistance from the Lincolnshire Morning Star Rotary Club. Rotarian Danny Spungen originally saw Habimana speak March 11 at the Chicago Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Terre Haute, Ind., and mentioned how he impressed he was to fellow Rotarian Greg Diethrich, SHS Foundation executive director.

"He's a raw, beautiful talent," Spungen said of Habimana.

That talent escaped one of the ugliest atrocities in history. In the early 1990s, a series of events led to the Hutu-controlled government in Rwanda to call for Tutsi extinction. In 100 days, before the outside world intervened, nearly 1 million Tutsi (about 80 percent of that tribe's population) died, suddenly making that country the world leader in orphans. Habimana recalled being referred to as a "cockroach" or "snake," but being young to understand why.

In the years since, he has learned about the events that led to the genocide—and the sad fact that what happened to his people has happened many times before.

"I started to learn about the Holocaust, and World War II," he said. "We have to change the realities about the way that we see people from other backgrounds, or with different skin colors."

Part of what made his experience so terrifying, he said, was the fact that the killers looked and sounded exactly like those they killed. The nation speaks the same language (Kinyarwanda), and he said that in those days, the only way one could tell a Hutu apart from a Tutsi was to check which ethnicity was written on their government-issued identification cards.

"It's black people, just like me," Habimana said.

Asked what Rwanda is like 20 years later, Habimana said the infrastructure and education systems are improving—and everyone's ID's list only "Rwandan."

"You guys are helping me," he told the students. "You're listening."



Emmanuel Habimana, a survivor of genocide in Rwanda, speaks March 18 to students at Stevenson High School.

Ronnie Wachter/Sun-Times Media



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