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March 29, 2014 | By Sheryl DeVore, Special to the Tribune



A Stevenson High School student shakes the hand of Rwandan genocide survivor Emmanuel Habimana after he spoke about the 1994 tragedy that left him and more than 75,000 other children orphaned. (Sheryl DeVore photo, for the Chicago Tribune)



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Orphaned during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Emmanuel Habimana posed a question to Stevenson High School students, including Rafi Stifelmann, that chilled her to the bone.

How long will it be until we actually mean it when we say, "Never again?"

Habimana spoke during several appearances throughout both Lake and Cook counties about the killing of nearly one million Tutsis, including his parents and siblings, by the Hutus in Rwanda 20 years ago. He and more than 75,000 other children lost their parents during the 100-day rampage.

"What happened to us is unimaginable," he told Stevenson students on March 19. "It's inhuman."

Having just completed a documentary film on Rwandan orphans, Habimana also spoke about his country's path to reconciliation, which he said is difficult, but going well.

"It's really tough to imagine," said Stifelmann, a 17-year-old junior from Buffalo Grove. "I'm very spoiled. I'm living in America. If I would have been in that situation, I wouldn't have made it. I couldn't have been strong. He saw his father get killed. If I saw my parents that way, I wouldn't have been able to go on."

Danny Spungen of Lincolnshire, through the Florence and Laurance Spungen Family Foundation, arranged Habimana's visit to Carmel, Mundelein, Highland Park, Deerfield, Stevenson and Maine West High schools as well as Wood Oaks Junior High in Northbrook and several religious congregations. Spungen had heard Habimana speak at the Candles Holocaust Museum in Indiana earlier this month and said he believed it was important that students hear the 29-year-old survivor's story.

"The connection between Rwanda and the Holocaust is riveting," said Spungen, a board member of the Indiana museum. "I hate the words 'never again.'"

Habimana spoke of hiding in schools and churches after half of his family were killed as Hutis raided his town.

"We heard a woman screaming so hard. She was being killed by knives. She died in a horrible way," he said.

The students sat quietly as Habimana displayed a photo of an adult Rwandan's nose being measured to determine if he was a Tutsi or a Hutu. That same thing happened to Jews during the Holocaust, he said, when six million Jews died and which United Nations officials had said would never happen again.

When Habimana was 7, his classmates called him a cockroach because he was a Tutsi. Teachers wrote down the names of each child and labeled them as either Tutsi or Hutu. Newspapers published a Hutu's List of Ten Commandments.

Commandment No. 1: We shall consider a traitor any Hutu who marries a Tutsi woman, befriends a Tutsi woman, employs a Tutsi woman as a secretary or concubine.

Repeating the story has been painful as well as cathartic for Habimana. In between talks at Stevenson, he put his head down in his hands and said he was tired. But determination trumps fatigue, just as determination trumped the horror he experienced 20 years ago, he said.

When the genocide ended, Habimana learned his two older sisters were still alive. He found them and they cared for one another. Habimana also helped organize what he called "families" among the orphans. They created groups with designated mothers and fathers and siblings – and it worked, he said. It helped some of them deal with the loss of their parents.

"I felt this responsibility that I had to help my people," he said.

Habimana, now a law school student in Rwanda, has traveled the world conveying his message and working on "Komora: To Heal," a National Geographic-funded documentary about orphans of the genocide against the Tutsis.

Many times over, students want to know what they can do, how they can help, Habimana said.

"You have to learn and prevent," he told the Stevenson students. "As young people, we will have to make a difference. Get interested in knowing other worlds. We all need each other at some point. I believe some day, one of you will be secretary general of the United Nations or head of a big influential company, and you can help.

"When the story is not told, it will keep happening again and again. Your role is needed. Today it is just to remind each other. Respect yourself. Respect others."

Northbrook resident and social studies teacher Jim Schuster organized the Mundelein-based Carmel High School event March 18. Schuster, who teaches a Holocaust and genocide class at Carmel said it was important for students to hear Habimana speak.

"These students need to understand what mankind can do – before approaching how to deal with it. These are students getting ready to go out into the world and they need to understand they have a role in" preventing future genocides, he said.

Rwanda is trying to move forward, Habimana said. The government has removed the words Tutsi and Hutu from the language they share. Officials have asked Hutus – those who killed Tutsis as well as other Hutus – to seek forgiveness. Today, Hutu and Tutsi children play together.

Habimana said over the years, he's experienced anger, guilt and fear, but believes he is learning to forgive.

"You have to accept yourself and what happened to you. Holding in the anger and hatred doesn't help," he said.

At Carmel and Stevenson, many students stood in line after Habimana spoke to have their photos taken with him. They shook his hand. They hugged him. They smiled.

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