

Rwandan genocide survivor speaks at Midland Park High School

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MIDLAND PARK — Jacqueline Murekatete knows what a toll harassment, intimidation and bullying can take.

It took the lives of her siblings, her parents and her grandmother. "We were referred to as 'cockroaches' who needed to be found and exterminated," Murekatete told students at [Midland Park High School](#) on Oct. 7. "Every minute, you felt it would be your last."

One of the featured speakers during the pre-K through Grade 12 school district's Week of Respect, held in compliance with the state's new Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying legislation, Murekatete shared a tale of survival that has overshadowed her life for more than 17 years.

She is not just any survivor. She is a survivor of the Rwandan genocide.

In a morning assembly, Murekatete, 26, offered a personal account of what transpired after the plane carrying Rwanda's president was shot down and extremists began singling out members of a minority in the country for slaughter.

Members of Murekatete's family, who were Tutsi, met the same fate as an estimated 800,000 others who were killed during a 100-day period in 1994.

At age 9, Murekatete said, she found herself with her grandmother, who was in her 60s, separated from her family — spared because of their ages. She recalled being hidden by strangers, and then by "three Italian priests" who ran an orphanage in Rwanda.

"They risked their lives to save ours," she said. "I wanted to scream and cry, but I couldn't. To this day, I have no explanation of how we survived, except that we were lucky."



from left, director of curriculum John Schembari, Midland Park High School principal Nick Capuano, Jacqueline Murekatete and schools Superintendent Dr. Marie Cirasella

Her grandmother was turned out of the orphanage, but Murekatete stayed there for two months.

"The priests were harassed and other children there were killed," she said. "All the while I was hoping I would find my grandmother and my parents."

She did not go into detail, but told the students that she later realized the other members of her family had been killed.

"They were killed not because of anything they had done but because being a Tutsi was a crime," she said.

An uncle who had escaped from Rwanda and emigrated to the United States lived in New York City; he adopted her in 1995.

Entering fifth grade, she said, she knew "very little."

"I didn't have any technology where I was in Rwanda; it was a culture shock.'

And, she said, "The first years were difficult because I was struggling to deal with the loss of my family."

She has come a long way since then. After graduating from high school, she earned a bachelor's degree in political science from New York University and is currently in her third year at the Benjamin Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University.

A student asked whether she had ever returned to her homeland.

"Last December I went back for the first time in 15 years," she said. "I worried I would become crazy because I knew I would be face to face with the people who had killed my relatives."

Murekatete said the Hutu, the majority ethnic group responsible for the genocide, still live in the villages among the Tutsi and justify their actions by saying the "government ordered them to do it."

She returned again in August, she said, but could not bring herself to go back to her village.

Another student asked if the Tutsis in Rwanda are safe now.

"Ninety-five percent of the Tutsis were killed," she said. "The hatred is still very real. Hutus are still taught that Tutsis cannot be trusted; they were indoctrinated."

But, she said, there is no longer an identification system like the one instituted during the early 1990s.

The law student is spokeswoman for Jacqueline's Human Rights Corner and Miracle Corners of the World. She also works with the Genocide Prevention Network and the American Jewish community to help genocide survivors and educate the world about what she calls the "ongoing threat of genocide." She has spoken in Belgium, Israel, Bosnia and Germany.

"I am open to going anywhere, even Siberia," she said.

After the assembly, [Midland Park](#) journalism students accompanied Murekatete to the television studio where they asked her questions on camera. Anna Gackowski, editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, asked Murekatete whether she realized what it meant when the president of Rwanda was killed in the plane that was shot down and why the Hutus began its killing campaign.

"Within a few hours, Hutus got on the radio and began calling for the killing of Tutsis because they said they could not be trusted," she said. "And when you asked Hutus later, 'Why did you do it?' they immediately answer that they did not have a choice.

"But this is a testament to the fact that you always have a choice."

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