

Newsday

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ALL EDITIONS

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

By Dave Marcus

WITNESS TO HISTORY IN RWANDA



As a child in Rwanda, Jacqueline Murekatete, 23, went to an orphanage after her parents and six siblings were killed in a genocide. In 1995, at age 9, she was brought to Queens by an uncle who adopted her. She studied at Stony Brook University, then transferred to New York University, where she earned her BA in political science last spring. Murekatete, who lives in Brooklyn, travels to schools to speak about tolerance.

"I didn't learn about Martin Luther King or Ghandi or Elie Wiesel and Simon Wiesenthal, the Holocaust survivors, until I moved to Queens. I was definitely very much inspired because they stood up to all kinds of violence, they fought for something they believed in, despite the environment they lived in, despite the fear they could be killed.

"I think my activism began when I was a sophomore in high school, in Queens. After listening to a speech by a Holocaust survivor, David Gewirtzman, who lived in Great Neck, I wrote him a letter. He said I should go on the road and speak with him. I felt I had a duty as a survivor to speak for those who could never speak for themselves because over a million people had been murdered in Rwanda's genocide. My parents and my siblings, my aunts and uncles were killed, not because they were criminals, not because of anything they had done, but because of their ethnicity. They were Tutsis living in a country which believed that being Tutsis was a crime deserving of death.

"We speak about international injustices as well as those in the students' own community, including racism and anti-Semitism. Right here in America, innocent people suffer from hatred based on race, religion or ethnicity.

"I'm also working on a human rights project for Miracle Corners of the World. I have helped [a nonprofit group founded by Eddie Bergman, a Northport High School graduate] raise half the money for a \$200,000 community center in my old village in Rwanda, where survivors of the genocide that ended 14 years ago live next to the perpetrators. For a long time, I felt if I went back I would go crazy. I would spend my whole life being bitter and angry. But I plan to go back this summer."