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by Susan Sawyers

Never again. When I was growing up, I heard those two words over and over again. My friends and I were told about the Holocaust so often that rather than engage, many of us grew deaf and numb and did nothing.

Today the holocausts are happening all over again in The Congo, Sudan, Afghanistan, to just to name a few. And there are catastrophic oil spills, natural disasters and acts of terrorism. But today's twenty-somethings, the millennials, are not only facing these realities but striving to make the world a better place -- for those who live through these atrocities. They are conscious, driven and are anything but powerless.



Michael Kleiman.



Michael Pertnoy.

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Case in point: a compelling new documentary: the characters and creators of the award-winning documentary film *The Last Survivor*. This surprisingly uplifting movie by **Michael Pertnoy** and **Michael Kleiman**, both 26, is about survivors of genocide. Like their characters, the filmmakers address global issues through social action. If it sounds like a snooze, you should know that *The Last Survivor* has won accolades at major film festivals for being “staggeringly powerful,” as one critic put it.

The film, shot in five countries across four continents, presents the lives of survivors of four different genocides and mass atrocities – Rwanda, Congo, Sudan and the Holocaust. Three of the four survivors are in their twenties. **Jacqueline**, 25, is building a community resource center in Rwanda. **Justin**, 27, acts as a translator for refugees in St. Louis and **Adam**, 21, works with Sudanese refugees in Israel. The fourth and final person, **Hédi**, established a support group for international refugees in Sweden. She’s in her 80s. These stories of loss, survival and hope highlight the experiences these individuals share not only as survivors of genocide but, more broadly, as human beings. And the remarkable thing is they leave us filled with hope, not dread.

Survivors Thriving

Name: Jacqueline Murekatete, 25

Mission: To educate the public about genocide to prevent it from happening again, and to establish a community resource center in Rwanda for people to gain job skills and rebuild their lives.

Motivation: Murekatete's parents and six siblings were among the more than one million people slaughtered during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide.

Name: Adam Bashar, 21

Mission: To ensure that the basic needs of every Sudanese refugee in Israel are met.

Motivation: An attack on Bashar’s village forced him to flee to Egypt when he was 13. More violence drove him to the Sinai Desert. Unable to get a paying job, he went to Israel. The first Darfuri minor to be granted the right to an education in Israel, Bashar attended a boarding school near Haifa.



Jacqueline Murekatete.

Adam Bashar.

Name: Justin Semahoro Kimenyerwa, 27

Mission: Translator and aid to refugees at Barnes Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri.

Motivation: Kimenyerwa was separated from his family when his village was attacked in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He fled alone into Burundi, then Rwanda and then Nairobi, before settling in the U.S. two years ago with the help of Mapendo International.

Name: Hédi Fried, 86

Mission: To inspire hope. Fried founded Café 84 in 1984. A psychologist, Fried runs therapy groups for survivors.

Motivation: “Democracy dies if you don’t work for it.”

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Justin Semahoro Kimenyerwa.

Hédi Fried.

“The movie isn’t just about the past,” said the film’s producer, 23-year-old **Samuel Goldberg**. “It inspires activism. The next generation is less inclined to let things slip by. What matters,” he said, “is that the audience understand the agenda. It’s a social-action documentary. We want to engage the audience.” That’s a good thing because, as we know, atrocities continue to happen, and the life stories of the film’s characters – Jacqueline, Justin, Adam and Hédi – inspire us to prevent further abuses.

In the end, the film is an intimate reflection on how four very different people reassembled their broken lives and managed to transcend their tragedies for the greater good.

“The victims are those who are dead,” said Transylvanian-born **Hédi Fried**, an 86-year-old survivor of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, who now lives in Sweden. “I have to do something with my life.”



Adam Bashar addresses the crowd at a rally in support of the ICC arrest warrant for Omar al-Bashir, President of Sudan.



Jacqueline speaks to students at KROP senior high school.

As have the filmmakers. They originally set out to make a documentary about Holocaust survivors. Pertnoy traveled to concentration camps under the auspices of

March of the Living, an international educational program that brings Jewish teens from all over the world to Poland to learn the lessons of the Holocaust and to lead Jewish people into the future vowing “never again.” Several years later, he found himself back at the camps, where he repeated the vow of “never again” – and like Hédi, he knew had to do something because it was happening again.

And so Pertnoy and Kleiman spent three years traveling the world, documenting the lives of genocide survivors and their stories of strength and hope. *The Last Survivor* weaves together a powerful tale of four unforgettable individuals who manage to make sense of tragedy while raising awareness of ongoing human atrocities. The heroes’ journeys inspire hope and, ultimately, action in us all.



Justin shares his experience with his church The New City Fellowship.



Hedi walking through Bergen-Belsen.

“It’s difficult to convince someone to care, but even if one person is inspired to do something, said Goldberg, “to read **Nick Kristoff** [The New York Times columnist], to contact their representative or go to the [\[Last Survivor\]](#) website and click on ‘Take Action,’ this is meant to be the beginning of a conversation.”

As a viewer, I found myself moved to action rather than indifference. We are spurred to do something, anything, to end human-rights abuses, to work with refugees in our own country, to send a tweet or post a message on facebook.

Once upon a time, the closest my friends got to social action was dressing in a red and white striped pinafore and volunteering at a local hospital. Yet today, we witness a broad cohort of young people who are traveling the world, pushing their comfort levels and engaging. It could be easy to say that the lack of job security or the tarnished financial industry has motivated them to follow their bliss. But there’s more to it than that.



Michael Pertnoy (Co-Director), Sam Goldberg, Jeff Scheffelt (Consulting Producer), and Thomas Sweeney on the Red Carpet at the Magnolia Theater for the Dallas Film Society.

The film was produced by Righteous Pictures, a collective of young artists and social activists, committed to creative, character-based, global projects as a platform for dialogue on critical issues of our time. The Last Survivor opened in the U.S. in January this year and had its international premiere at the Jerusalem Film Festival in July. Their second endeavor, *web*, which examines the work of One Laptop per Child, is near completion.

The Last Survivor will make its New York premiere at the Walter Reade Theater, Lincoln Center; filmlinc.com/. Tickets for the screening are no longer available. But bear in mind, there's more to the story than the film. Take action. Check the website for future showings.

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