

Warren Patch

Survivor Gives Students a Personal View of Genocide

Watchung Hills students hear Jacqueline Murekatete's story

By Ellie Mathews



November 28, 2011. Genocide—the destruction or annihilation of a race, nation, tribe—seldom leaves a survivor, and just as rarely, a survivor who is articulate and motivated. Such a person is Jacqueline Murekatete a genocide survivor and human rights activist.

Ms. Murekatete appeared before the entire student body of Watchung Hills Regional High School on Nov. 18 as part of the school's yearlong theme, "Heroes, Hope and Honor."

When Murekatete was not yet 10 years old, she saw her whole village and all of her family—father, mother and six siblings—murdered by Rwandan Hutu tribesmen in a 100-day massacre in April of 1994. Miraculously "saved" by an uncle who spirited her away in an ambulance, Murekatete was later able to come to the United States.

She had successfully survived the slaughter of a million of her countrymen.

Since giving her first presentation while still in high school, Murekatete has spoken in more than 300 forums—at schools, colleges, universities, community centers—in the United States and abroad. A graduate of New York University, now studying law at the Benjamin Cardozo School at Yeshiva University, Murekatete still finds time to speak out about genocide victims and survivors worldwide. She addressed the United Nations on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Rwanda genocide and she regularly takes part in human rights, genocide prevention and philanthropy conferences, challenging people around the world: to remember those who have been slaughtered; to fight indifference; to live together in peace.

Her work has been acknowledged by many organizations: the Girls Learn International Humanitarian Award, the U.N. International Peace Ambassadors' Outstanding Humanitarian Award, the Moral Courage Award from the American Jewish Committee, an honorary award from New York University at the 175th Commencement Ceremony, the Global Peace & Tolerance Award from the Friends of the U.N., the Scandinavian Spirit Award and the Ina Kay Award from the Anti-Defamation League.

She's been exposed to an even greater audience through features in the Newsweek, The New York Times, Esquire, UN Chronicle, Washington Times, People, Glamour, Teen Vogue, and media outlets such as CNN, PBS, NBC, ABC, MTV-U and others. She was the youngest recipient ever to receive the Ellis Island Medal of Honor.

Students who heard her address were moved and motivated.

"It was shocking how people were attacked by their 'friends' (the Hutu tribesmen)," said one student.

"Her speech made me want to become more involved in preventing genocide and hate crimes," said another.

"She made me realize that I could make a difference," was still another reaction.

How could this "making a difference" come about? What small steps might students take to change present attitudes, actions?

Students learned of the organization founded by the speaker in 1999, Miracle Corners of the World (MCW), located in New York City, a non-profit organization whose mission is to "empower youth to become positive agents of change in their communities." Its programs for students include Leadership Training, Community Centers and Oral Health Care.

The MCW works cooperatively with a second organization, Jacqueline's Human Rights Corner, founded in 2007. Its programs include developing a curriculum, organizing community events, such as commemorations, awareness events, etc. Jacqueline's Human Rights Corner is supporting the outfitting and operating costs of a community center in Rwanda where genocide survivors will "empower themselves and each other to rebuild their lives, and to educating the global community about the need to prevent genocide."

Students' reactions to Murekatete's presentation were positive. They ranged from donating money to the two organizations, to participating in the volunteer and internship opportunities afforded by the two New York City-based organizations; following up on Facebook to get additional information; joining social networking sites; alerting others about the effects of racism and the horrors of genocide.

One student summarized the experience up by saying: "It made genocide personal—seeing a real victim of it, in person."

Passionate, yet humble; strong, yet touching, Murekatete is using her experience to benefit others' lives and help create a more tolerant world; one in which genocide would become a

crime of the past, where “Never Again” is transformed from promise to practice, from hope to reality, said the speaker.

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