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Genocide study brings conference to Hamburg High

After his village was attacked in the Sudanese civil war, nine-year-old Fidele Diing Dhan spent years on the run, hiding in the African bush with other displaced or orphaned children, walking thousands of miles in constant danger, eking out a minimal existence in refugee camps. Later, he and some of these young men known as the "Lost Boys of Sudan" found hope and a new life in the U.S. For Fidele, it meant an opportunity to become an American citizen, to graduate from SUNY Buffalo and to help his people through a campaign currently under way to fund a medical clinic and school in his native country.

In July, his epic journey brought him to Hamburg High School, where he shared his astounding story of genocide survival with 34 students from 16 districts at a unique week-long conference organized in part by two Hamburg English teachers. The Summer Institute for Human Rights and Genocide Studies educated students about major genocides in world history, from the Holocaust to the modern day conflict in Darfiir, Sudan. The event is believed to be only the second of its kind in the nation. It included genocide survivors, education experts and national leaders working on the front lines to end ethnic cleansing.

Institute organizers said its goal was to inspire students to take action to make the world a better place. Students were encouraged to become informed about the issue, talk to others about it, write letters and lead by example. Organizers also wanted to instill hope and remind students that they have a voice that can lead to change.

"This cycle doesn't have to continue," commented Drew Beiter, a Springville teacher credited as the spark for the event. He noted that Sudan President Omar al-Bashir is the first sitting head of state facing charges in the international legal system for war crimes, including genocide and crimes against humanity.

Hamburg teacher Matt Meader, another event co-organizer along with Hamburg teacher Lori Raybold and St. Mary's High School teacher Stephanie Brown, said leaders in this country listen when students speak.



In front, from left: Charlene Higgins, genocide survivor Fidele Diing Dhan, Alyssa Markey, Rebekah Mills. Back: Alex Opiel, St. Mary's teacher Stephanie Brown, Hamburg teacher Matt Meader, Springville teacher Drew Beiter, Hamburg teacher Lori Raybold.

"You affect policy. You can make change," Mr. Meader told the group, which included five Hamburg High students.

One of the participants, Charlene Higgins, a junior at Hamburg High this fall, said she wanted to be at the institute because of her interest in politics, to become more educated on the issue of genocide and to make others aware. She already has stepped forward on issues through her involvement with the school's Student Activists group.

The highlight of the week for her was hearing a Rwandan genocide survivor speak, combined with watching a dramatic film.

"It shows that it was real," Charlene said. "It's the individual stories that make it real."

The other Hamburg participants were Rebekah Mills, a sophomore; Alex Opiel, junior; Shannon Campbell, junior; and Alyssa Markey, senior. Students applied to attend the institute by writing an essay.

In conjunction with then- time at Hamburg, the group planned to attend the International Humanitarian Law Dialogs in August at the Chautauqua Institute, providing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet judges who prosecuted genocide and human rights cases at the International Criminal Court.