
Students learn value of protecting human rights

Frustrated by events in Darfur, they study devastating impact of genocides, meet survivors

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Auschwitz survivor Joseph Diamond with Summer Institute students.

This article was written by Paul Aroune, president of the Springville Teachers Association.

More than 35 students from 15 western New York high schools had the opportunity to hear genocide survivors and human rights experts, and network for a common cause.

Called the Summer Institute for Human Rights and Genocide Studies, the goal of this summer event at Hamburg High School, Erie County, was to have students analyze the response of the United States to the genocides of the past 100 years so they might be more active in preventing human rights abuses today — especially in responding to the genocide in Darfur.

Founded a year ago by NYSUT members Matthew Meader, Andrew Beiter, Lori Raybold, Stephanie Brown and Ben Higgins, the goal of the Summer Institute was to

broaden and deepen students' knowledge so they may, in turn, educate others, and perhaps go on to careers that will focus on human rights

The five teachers got to know each other through their work with Buffalo for Africa, (<http://www.buffaloforafrica.org/>), a group created by another NYSUT member and Frontier High School language teacher, Christina Sullivan.

"Through working together, we realized that we had a unique opportunity to reach out to the world," said Raybold, who teaches English at Hamburg.

"We noticed through our classes that students were concerned about Darfur, but were frustrated that they didn't have the opportunity to learn more. By combining our efforts as a group, we felt we were able to use our power as teachers to in some way make the world a better place." The five were assisted by college interns and declared social studies education majors

Michael Baronich and Lara Sweeney.

Following the template of other summer institutes designed for teachers, this course was uniquely for students.

The institute featured internationally known speakers, such as professor David Crane, lead prosecutor of the Sierra Leone Human Rights Tribunals and founder of Impunity Watch.



Rwandan genocide survivor Victor Habinshuti.

Other presenters included Auschwitz survivor Joseph Diamond, Rwandan genocide survivor Victor Habinshuti, Sudanese Lost Boy Fidele Diing Dhan and two 90-year-old Dachau liberators, Miron Wasik and Charles Zappo.

The Summer Institute linked students to the International Institute of Buffalo, the Holocaust Resource Center of Buffalo, the Jamestown School District's Teaching American History Grant, the Robert H. Jackson Center, Buffalo for Africa and the Southtowns Teachers' Center.

"For sponsorships, we wanted to involve local agencies that had a similar purpose as our own," said Summer Institute co-chair and Grand Island history teacher Stephanie Brown.

The administration of Hamburg Central Schools provided the venue and was eager to promote the institute to other districts. Additionally, the Western New York Council of NYSUT presidents actively advertised the event through their chapters.

The 2009 Summer Institute hopes to expand to two weeklong sessions. Students also will be asked to attend both a fall and spring refresher.

"Our longterm goal is to encourage other teachers around the country to have similar institutes," said NYSUT member and Springville technology coordinator Ben Higgins.

"Fortunately, we have a talented Web designer named Colleen Coster, who has allowed our message to be spread around the world."

The Web site can be reached at <http://www.summerinstituteofbuffalo.org/>.

What students said:

Students of the Summer Institute completed surveys at the end of the course. Here's what some of them said:

"The speakers have definitely left an impression on me that will last a lifetime. Although their stories are devastating, they gave me an urge to help and know more."

"My entire outlook on life has changed. I had read things in books and learned things in class, but now I have 'experienced it'."

"I look forward to using the information that I have learned to make a difference in the world and in Africa."

"The Summer Institute was the last push I needed to know that I can't just stand and watch anymore."

About New York Teacher

New York Teacher is NYSUT's statewide, official membership newspaper, published every two weeks during the school year and mailed to the homes of all NYSUT members. With a press run of more than 600,000, it is the nation's largest-circulation biweekly in the field of public education. Each edition explores issues of concern to NYSUT members. The newspaper includes columns and features on professional development, legislation, School-Related Professional issues, higher education, health, legal news, member benefits, letters and NYSUT policies.