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Danbury students' film looks at Darfur genocide

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DANBURY - A few talked about it in English class, and some mentioned it in the hallway. Two spoke about it while running. What could they do as Danbury High School students about the genocide in **Darfur**? How could they help put an end to the more than 400,000 deaths of men, women and children there? How could they help the 2.5 million people forced to flee their homes?

A dozen seniors researched the conditions in western Sudan, gathering quotes and music in hopes of moving others about what the United Nations has called the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The result is a moving, eight-minute documentary meant to raise awareness about the genocide. It will be aired between 8 and 9 p.m. Thursdays on Comcast channel 23 this month on the Ivon Alcime show.

The movie is called "The Promise, a reminder of the promise the United Nations and the world made in 1945 to hold people accountable for crimes against humanity."

"We didn't know about (the genocide) before and when we did, we wanted to help," Catherine Trieu said. "This can send a message, be an example that you can help and make an impact."

After school for the past three months, the students worked with assistant principal Tim Salem on the project, which wasn't for class credit or for an assignment.

Salem wrote to the United Nations last fall, asking it to intervene in **Darfur**. He wrote the script using the letter and the students' research.

With the backdrop of a picture of the Holocaust, student narrator

Emily DeMasi says "the study of history teaches us to learn from the mistakes of the past in order to prevent future occurrences, yet mankind has not yet applied this theory to the concept of the genocide."

Several students spoke extemporaneously in the film, including Caitlin Eaglin.

"When I read about the genocide, I think of the Holocaust and of things that happened a long time ago," she says in the film. "When I think about the children in Sudan who are my age, I think, would I still be alive if I were there, would my family still be alive?"

The movie opens with John Williams' theme from "Schindler's List." Other music selections include "Will I" from "Rent"; "Interlude" by Richard Wright; "Don't Give Up," by Peter Gabriel; "Angel" by Sarah McLachlan and "Where the Streets Have no Name" by U2.

Facts of the events are written across the spare screen. Photographs of starving children, the hopeful, mass graves and young attackers are interspersed with quotes from Abraham Lincoln and Cicero. Martin Luther King Jr. reminds the viewer that "Injustice anywhere threatens justice everywhere."

And Arthur Schopenhauer suggests that "compassion is the basis of all morality."

"I was moved to tears," said English teacher Deborah Casey, one of the first teachers to see the video finished two days ago. "The commitment of the students made it even more moving. They can make an impact in the world beyond our high school."

Lily Yeung said she hopes the film will raise awareness.

"It's hard," Yeung said. "We're eight people. Personally, we can't do as much individually as the top people in the world. Seven students at Danbury High aren't going to affect the genocide, but if we can get the public aware to go knocking on the doors of the politicians, that's when things can happen."

Salem, who taught about genocide when he taught the multicultural issues class, said he saw how important the project became.

"It's important for these students - like the last quote in the video by Ghandi 'to be the change you wish to see in the world.' They are trying to be part of the change," Salem said.

Brian Simalchik, who did the technical filming, music and editing of the film, said he didn't know about the genocide until he talked to the

students and Salem.

"The idea that the most basic right, the chance for life, has been taken away is awful. They have no right to trample the rights of others. And in our indifference, we allow it," he said.

The students are urging peers to visit the Web site www.savedarfur.org.

The Save **Darfur** Coalition is an alliance of over 140 faith-based, humanitarian and human rights organizations, that has started Million Voices for **Darfur** to raise awareness of the genocide and promote the actions necessary to end it.

Katherine Calle said once she learned about the genocide, she had to act.

"If you know about it, you become responsible for doing something about it," Calle said. "In fact, if you know and don't do anything, it's worse than not doing anything at all."

DeMasi said there are so many problems she can't do anything about, but this is a contribution.

"It's at least something to make things better," DeMasi said. "We want to put the video in as many places as possible."

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For more information or to view the video, contact Tim Salem at (203) 797-4716.

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