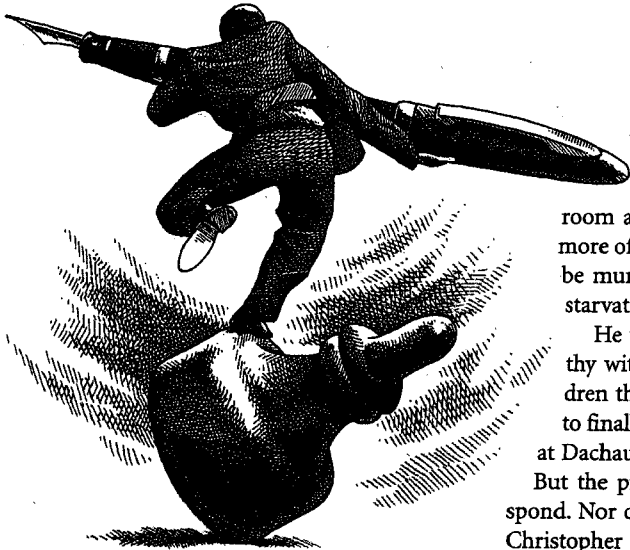


Danbury and Darfur

How one school illuminated—in eight minutes—the fate of millions.



Darfur is roughly 6,400 miles from Connecticut. Which puts it somewhere Out There, south of Egypt and west of Ethiopia. Yet early one morning in May 2004, Darfur hit home in Danbury.

Tim Salem couldn't sleep. This was often the case ever since, at age 35, he became a father for the first time. Two-week-old Alexandra was adorable but not, apparently, sympathetic to her parents' need for a good night's rest. So Tim went to the study just off the bedroom to read the news on the Web. There was more about the widespread slaughters of civilians in the Darfur region of Western Sudan, including graphic photos. Many of the dead were infants, just like Alexandra. Tim looked away from the screen and at his daughter, who'd fallen asleep in his wife Sasha's arms. And he thought, well, it's just the luck of the draw that his own child was not in the rifle sights of mass murderers.

Soon after he began to write letters. He wrote to His Excellency, the president of the United Nations. He wrote to Oprah Winfrey, to "60 Minutes" and to members of Congress, even some who don't represent Connecticut. Each letter was on the stationery of Danbury High School, where he was an assistant principal and had also taught multicultural issues.

He wrote that he had always challenged students to "make a difference in the lives of others" and to "speak out against racism."

But there was a disconnect in the case of Darfur. "Apathy is now spreading into my classroom and in its wake a generation or more of Western Sudanese children will be murdered, orphaned or will die of starvation and disease."

He urged the U.N. to "replace apathy with empathy, and show the children that we care." He implored them to finally live up to the pledge on a wall at Dachau, "Never Again."

But the president of the U.N. didn't respond. Nor did anyone else (except for Sen. Christopher J. Dodd). Their silence seemed to say: "Africa is doomed. But what do you expect from the continent that spawned the Rwandan machete massacres, Idi Amin, and the ruthless policies of apartheid?"

Nationally, *New York Times* columnist

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Nicholas J. Kristof became the voice of conscience about Darfur. Locally, it was Tim Salem. Every day, the assistant principal saw the quote from Gandhi on his office wall: "Be the change you want to see in the world." And he carried that message to many classrooms.

A few students responded, most from Deborah Casey's Honors English class. Two of them, Lily Yeung and Caitlin Eaglin, argued that the time for letter writing was over and suggested making a video instead. Tim Salem loved the idea—but had no idea how to do it.

"We need Brian," said one student. This

was a reference to Brian Simalchik, a technology wiz who will enroll at Williams College. But the group would have to lure him away from practicing Bach and Rachmaninoff on the piano.

Also important to the project was Katherine Calle, a Harvard-bound student who was embarrassed that until her senior year she hadn't known of the Darfur genocide. In this she was far from alone. A poll the students conducted showed that 85 percent of the school population, including the faculty, had no idea about the government-backed militia, the Janjaweed, or its campaign to slaughter or displace anyone who is not loyal to the government, or doesn't look like or pray as a Muslim, or farms the arid plains, or is in the path of oil.

Katherine Calle's grandfather, who works with the homeless in Philadelphia, told her that she is one of the lucky ones, born into freedom and generous circumstance, and that it is her duty to give something back. Tim Salem's Darfur project was perfect for her, and for the others.

The students spent many afternoons over several months collecting materials and trying to figure out how to turn apathy into action. They gathered statistics—more than 400,000 killed, millions made homeless—and dug into the history of the region.

They learned that Darfur was once a trade center (slaves and ivory) and that the present crisis began in 2003, long after the Sudanese secured independence from the British. Responding to a campaign of oppression, rebel groups led attacks against government forces, triggering the Janjaweed atrocities.

And yet as graphic as these outrages are, the U.S., focusing on Iraq instead, has done little in response. The African Union's small force can't address the problem. NATO declines. Darfur, clearly, is another Rwanda, only worse. Attention will be paid only when it's over—when a popular movie can be made, one that induces collective guilt.

The students at Danbury High, in their effort to make a video that could inspire action now, decided that the most effective

presentation is one that is personal—faces of children. They used images from sites that try to bring the world's attention to the plight of the victims (for example, savedarfur.org).

For this noncredit work students set aside extracurricular activities, and learned to handle criticism. When they showed an early version of the video to one class, response was tepid, even hostile. One student said there are troubles enough here at home and if the U.S. goes into Darfur with troops, "we'll be attacked here—we don't want another 9/11."

Even so, the students pressed on, inspired by Tim Salem, and by Elie Wiesel's view that "the opposite of love is not hate but indifference." They refined the video soundtrack. It would open with Itzhak Perlman's playing of John Williams' theme from *Schindler's List* and photos of the Holocaust. As powerful as this was, though, something seemed wrong. The violin was too high, said one collaborator. "No problem," responded Brian Simalchik. After a few minutes at the computer, he lowered Perlman's solo by an octave.

When the final version of *The Promise*, as the eight-minute video was titled, was shown to a few teachers and students, they were moved by it. Then as word spread, the video became a hot commodity—Yale wanted it, as did the U.S. Holocaust Museum.

The 2006 Wesport Film Festival named *The Promise* the Most Outstanding Film for Social Justice. The legislature also saw the video, after which state Treasurer Denise L. Nappier proposed that state pension money no longer be invested in companies with financial interests in Sudan. This is a lesson to all who wonder what ordinary citizens can do in response to international outrage. Even so, I wondered about how the video would play to the students of Danbury High.

In April, three weeks before the Washington rally intended to focus attention on the genocide in Darfur, I went to the school auditorium, where the video was to be shown for the first time to a large student population.

The teens who produced the video offered a brief overview of the project. And Tim Salem said, "In the time [you'll be sitting here], two children will be killed in Darfur."

When the video began, chatter in the auditorium ceased. Faces of the Holocaust became faces of the young and vulnerable of Africa. The music segued from John Williams to Peter Gabriel's "Don't Give Up."

When the video ended with a quote by Edmund Burke—"All that is needed for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing"—there was silence. And there were tears. And I would like to think that later, at dinner tables throughout Danbury, high school students were talking to their parents about a place called Darfur.

For more information on the film, visit dhsthepromise.com.