

Fighting Hate, Across Cultures and Generations

By COREY KILGANNON

David Gewirtzman and Jacqueline Murekatete stood before a restless group of students at Great Neck North High School, waiting to tell their stories. They seemed to be an unlikely pair speaking on what seemed an unlikely topic - genocide - for a group of teenagers munching on sandwiches and rustling snack wrappers.

By the time they had finished, however, the only sound that could be heard in the room was the faint hum of a radiator.

Mr. Gewirtzman, a 75-year-old retired pharmacist who lives in Great Neck, N.Y., on Long Island, survived the Holocaust by spending almost two years burrowed with other members of his family under a pigsty on a Polish farm.

Now, he visits local schools, hoping that by telling of his experiences, he can educate students and help to prevent a killing like the Holocaust from happening again.

When he spoke at a high school in Queens two years ago, Ms. Murekatete, then a student, was in the audience. She said his story had made her burst into tears. She wrote him a note relating her own horrible story, which took place in Rwanda, in central Africa, in 1994. She narrowly escaped being hacked to death by a rival tribe. Her family - both parents and all six siblings - did not.

"I finally found someone who understood what I went through because he went through the same thing," said Ms. Murekatete, now 19 and a freshman at the State University at Stony Brook.

Mr. Gewirtzman met the teenager, heard her story and suggested she begin speaking to groups with him.

It would not bring her family back, he said, but it might save other families from potential genocide. It would also help to heal her own pain.

"We are as different as can be," he told the students.

"She's black, I'm white; she's young, I'm old; she's African and Christian and I'm a Jew from Poland. Yet we're like brother and sister, because we're bound by the common trauma of our experience and a common history of pain and suffering and persecution."

Now they appear regularly together, hoping that they can bring experience and relevance to a harsh subject. But neither expected the impression they would have on each other, and how deep their friendship would grow with the only apparent bond being death.

Elaine Weiss, a history teacher at the high school who directs its social science research center, said she asked them to speak because "the kids can identify with an 18-year-old girl better than they can with a 75-year-old man."

She said, "Our kids read theories about racism and genocide in books. But when they hear similar real-life stories from a white European man and a black African teenager 55 years apart in age, who lived through events 50 years apart in history, it's not a theory anymore. It's alive."

Mr. Gewirtzman grew up in a small village in Poland and in November 1942, the family persuaded a local farmer to hide them and some relatives - eight people in all - for 20 months in a small trench below a pigsty strewn with mud and pig waste.

Day after day in the hole, they would argue whether to surrender to the Nazis, he recalled.

"At times my father would yell at me, 'Why did you lead us here? We should have gone to Treblinka and gotten it over with,'" Mr. Gewirtzman said. "I'd tell him, 'You may want to die, but don't you want your children to live?' Then he would snap out of it."

"We thought there wasn't a Jew in Europe still alive, but for some reason, I never once doubted we would survive," he said. "Maybe I was too young and naïve, but I never lost hope."

They did not escape until July 31, 1944, when the Nazis retreated.

Mr. Gewirtzman and his family lived in Europe for several years, then came to the United States in 1948. He served in the United States Army in Germany.

He and his wife have two grown sons and he also volunteers at the Nassau Holocaust Memorial Center, in Glen Cove, Long Island.

As Mr. Gewirtzman spoke, the students became spellbound. Some still held back tears as Ms. Murekatete began telling how she grew up as the second oldest of seven children on a family farm in Rwanda. Her family were members of a Tutsi tribe. In April 1994, when she was 9, the news came over the radio that the Hutu president had been killed. Groups of Hutu men and boys wielding guns, machetes and clubs began descending upon villages, killing Tutsis.

The day they reached her village, Ms. Murekatete was visiting her grandmother Magdalene Mukasharangabo in a nearby village. Her grandmother saved her by taking her to an orphanage.

After two months, she learned from surviving cousins that her family - her mother, father, two sisters, and four brothers - had been tortured and hacked to pieces with machetes. Most of her other relatives were also killed, including her grandmother.

She was brought to New York in October 1995, by an uncle who legally adopted her and applied for political asylum for her. She spoke only Kinyarwanda, but was placed in a fifth-grade class and soon learned English and began excelling in school.

She said she still sees her family in her dreams. Other times, though, she is chased by the men with machetes.

"I've never gone to a counselor or a therapist," she said. "At first, I guess I hoped it might just go away."

She said, "Some of my friends are afraid to ask me about it and I'm not a person who talks about my problems."

Ms. Murekatete is currently writing a book about her recollections of the genocide in Rwanda.

She also said that last September, she met the human rights advocate Elie Wiesel at an International Day of Peace ceremony at the United Nations. After hearing her story, he hugged her and said he would help her publish it.

With many cousins, aunts and uncles killed and only a few relatives left, Ms. Murekatete has grown close to Mr. Gewirtzman and his wife, Lillian, a Polish Jew, who had been sent with her family to Siberia for six years while Russia occupied Poland. Ms. Murekatete visits their home in Great Neck and has been to their summer home in the Hamptons. The Gewirtzmans went to her high school graduation, and she had tears in her eyes.

"I didn't know what to do with my experience and he showed me," she said when asked about that day.

Mr. Gewirtzman said, "In a way, we've become sort of parents to her."

"We both went through a traumatic experience," he said, "but instead of remaining bitter and angry and seeking revenge, we both resolved to spend the anger in a positive manner, to prevent this from ever happening again."

Ms. Murekatete shows listeners that racial hatred has outlived the Holocaust, and that genocide was not just something that happened to an old Jewish man from Poland, he said.

"When I go to an inner-city school, the kids might think they have nothing in common with some Jews 60 years ago, or me with slavery," he said.

"But when they see both of us, they see the problem is the same," he said. "It transcends race and ethnicity. People are still being taught hatred and it is hatred that we are fighting."

Ms. Murekatete said, "Sometimes, students ask if they can help, and I say, The best thing you can do for me is to educate yourselves so this doesn't continue to happen."

Fighting Hate, Across Cultures and Generations Questions: Answer in complete sentences on your own paper.

1. In your own words, what is genocide?
2. How did David Gewirtzman survive the Holocaust?
3. When did Jacqueline Murekatete meet Mr. Gewirtzman?
4. What did Murekatete and Gewirtzman decide to do together, and why?
5. According to Elaine Weiss, what is the benefit of having Murekatete and Gewirtzman speak together?
6. How did Ms. Murekatete survive the genocide in Rwanda?
7. Who is helping Ms. Murekatete publish her book?
8. According to Ms. Murekatete, how can students help her?
9. Write a five sentence summary of the article.
10. What is the main idea of the article?