

DEERFIELD REVIEW

‘There was killing all over’: Survivors of Holocaust, Rwandan genocide speak at Deerfield H. S.

By **Steve Sadin**

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When Claire Mukundente, a Rwandan genocide survivor now living in the Chicago area, meets a person who lived through the Holocaust she says feels an immediate connection.

“The first time I met a Holocaust survivor we understood each other,” Mukundente said. “We know what it’s like to live through genocide.”

Mukundente and Holocaust survivor Steen Metz were the featured speakers at Deerfield High School’s fourth annual Genocide Commemoration Day Monday. The event honors victims and survivors of mass killings.

At the start of each class period, students learned about genocide victims and survivors starting with Native Americans in the 19th century through the Holocaust, Rwanda and Cambodia in more recent times, according to Jordana Bornstein, a Deerfield senior who will attend New York University next year. She was one of eight student organizers of the event.

The stories of victims and survivors in Armenia, the Ukraine, Darfur, Bosnia and Kosovo were also part of the lessons.

The day also included exhibits on the rise of hate crimes and anti-Semitism in the U.S., U.S. actions during the Holocaust and the current struggles of refugees from Syria and Rohingya.

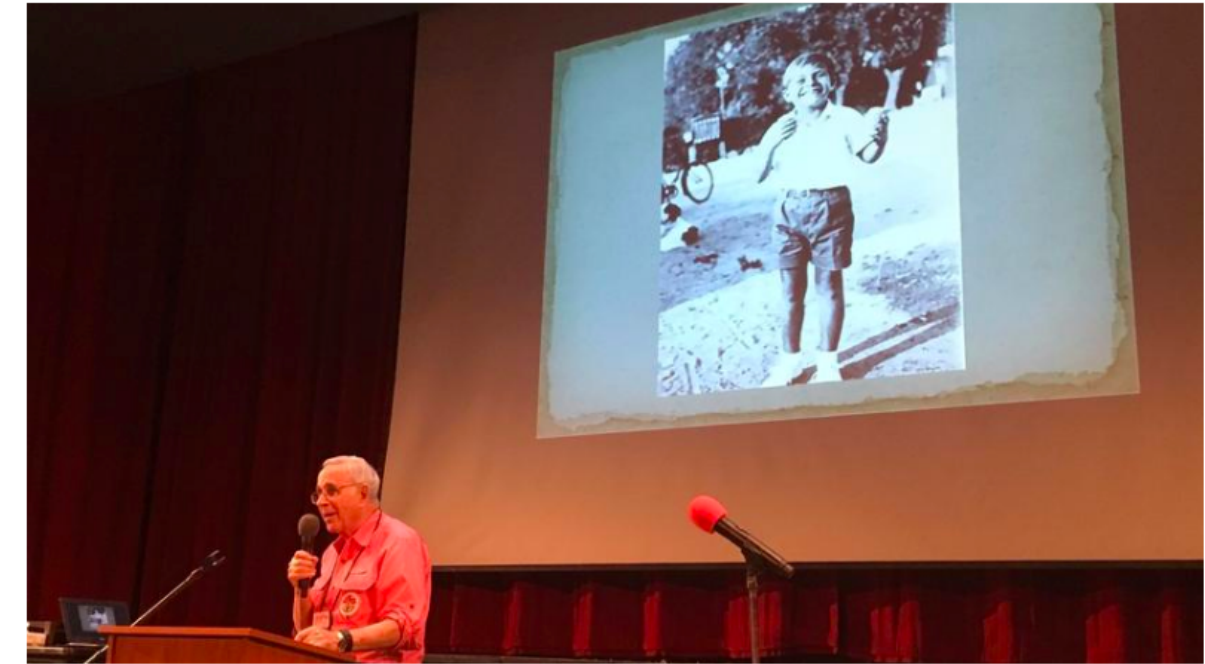
Like Mukundente, Metz said he too feels a bond with other atrocity survivors.

“I feel we all lived through and survived genocide,” Metz said before his talk. “I like to compare notes. All of our stories are different, even those who survived the Holocaust. The knowledge of surviving bonds us together.”

Metz, 83, was born in Denmark and said he was living a good life with his parents. He said in Denmark things remained somewhat normal after the Nazis invaded in 1940 but that changed in 1943 when he was sent to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in what was then Czechoslovakia. He and his mother survived, but his father died.

“It was 18 months of hell,” Metz said. “It was a prison camp. We did slave labor. I don’t know how my mother did it but I was able to stay with her.”

Mukundente, now 38, was 15 when she fled Kigali, Rwanda, to a refugee camp because one tribe started killing members of another tribe. She journeyed through



Holocaust survivor Steen Metz of Barrington tells his story during Genocide Commemoration Day at Deerfield High School beneath a photo taken before he was sent to the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp. (Steve Sadin / Pioneer Press)

Africa seeking a better life with her husband, her one child and a sister. She now has three children.

“There was killing all over,” Mukundente said.

Eventually Mukundente got to the United States in 2000 where she cleaned hotel rooms for seven years before deciding she wanted to make things better for people in Rwanda.

She began going back for periods of time to help. In 2017, she started Women United for Refugees & Immigrants of Illinois. She said the organization helps refugees and immigrants from all countries.

Another purpose of the Genocide Commemoration Day was to urge students to take action. Bronstein encouraged her classmates to do more than learn after Mukundente finished her remarks and a question session.

“Don’t forget,” Bronstein said. “Go out there and be an upstander,” she added using a term she first heard as a Deerfield Public Schools District 109 student to combat bullying.

Metz also used the word upstander when urging the students to take action.

“I don’t know if it’s an official word in the English language, but bystander is,” Metz said. “Upstander should be. Listen to the stories of Holocaust survivors, take it with you, remember them and share it with four other people.”

Sarah Gertz and Ty Melnick, sophomores and student organizers, said listening to Metz and Mukundente made them want to take action.

When he was asked what can be done to prevent future genocide, Metz had a three-word answer.

“Education, education, education,” Metz said.