



Harwich Students STAND Up to Genocide

by Marcella Vokey

With modern technology connecting us to the rest of the world, the number of people who remain unaware of today's genocide is astonishing. This realization drove Harwich High School students MacKenzie Hamilton and Andie Ramirez to stop scanning the news and take action.

These young women are members of the national organization STAND (Students Taking Action Now: Darfur, a student-led anti-genocide coalition.) Co-Presidents Hamilton and Ramirez have led the Harwich chapter of STAND, and serve as examples of tenacity and dedication through fundraising, spreading awareness, and lobbying for their cause.

"I didn't actually know anything about genocide when I first joined," admits Ramirez. Hamilton says she also joined STAND with little knowledge of genocide in the modern world. But after joining the program, both Hamilton and Ramirez wholeheartedly accepted the challenge of spreading the word to their classmates and to their community.

In their few years as STAND members, Hamilton and Ramirez have done much to spread the word. Locally, the impressive duo organized several events including a battle of the bands, talent show, and a week-long fast to raise money for the Sister Schools Program.

This program funds The New Sudan School in Djabal, Chad, and provides the necessary resources to educate communities recovering from genocide. During their events, Hamilton and Ramirez give presentations of alarming genocide statistics, including videos and facts to spread awareness of the problem.



MacKenzie Hamilton shows slides and discusses her recent mission trip to Rwanda.

Their commitment to this cause took them to the Massachusetts State House in June, where they testified before the Joint Committee on Education in support of proposition H.S 463, seeking to increase genocide education in Massachusetts. Currently, schools focus genocide education on the Holocaust of World War II while more current issues like those in Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur go untaught. Hamilton and Ramirez, as members of STAND, believe that education is crucial to stop the violation of human rights in other countries.



STAND students on the steps of the Massachusetts State House

"Consciously or unconsciously, every one of us does render some service or other. If we cultivate the habit of doing this service deliberately, our desire for service will steadily grow stronger, and we will make not only our own happiness but that of the world at large."

Gandhi

"STAND showed me what I want to do in my life and that even the smallest people can support the biggest cause," says Ramirez. She hopes to pursue an education in international studies and someday work in the Department for Peacekeeping Operations. But until graduating from high school in 2010, Ramirez will be filling Hamilton's shoes as a Harwich High senior, and returning officer of STAND.

This summer, Hamilton's connection with STAND offered her the chance to spend time in Rwanda as a member of a Human Rights Delegation. American and Rwandan youths collaborated to solve post-genocide issues by discussing the values and governments of each culture.

Hamilton plans to enter her freshman year at Smith College this fall, where she's already involved with starting a STAND chapter on campus. "I'm still learning and there is a ton more work to do," says Hamilton.

Upon her return from Rwanda, she spearheaded a summertime charity dinner and concert; the annual "Dinner for Darfur" was sponsored by several local restaurants, followed by a concert at the Chatham Bandstand featuring artists Sarah Lee Guthrie and Johnny Irion.

Hamilton promises, "I know for certain that I want to be working in Africa," a dream and destination that Ramirez shares. These young women have set their compasses East, where an impressive future undoubtedly awaits them both.

Marcella Vokey is currently a Junior at MIT, majoring in Materials Science & Engineering with a minor in Creative Writing. She grew up in Chatham, which she still considers home.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is the first permanent court created to prosecute perpetrators, no matter how powerful, of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide. Go to <http://www.pbs.org/pov/reckoning> to see a documentary called "The Reckoning" by Pamela Yates, which premiered on PBS Tuesday, July 14, 2009.

Please visit Harwich STAND <http://www.hhsstand.blogspot.com> for more information.