



Movie helps students learn how to 'Coexist'

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TYNGSBORO -- The perpetrators and victims of the Rwandan genocide lingered in the mind of 13-year-old Irena Manukian as she fell asleep Monday night.

Earlier that day at school, Irena, an eighth-grader at Innovation Academy Charter School, and her classmates, had become among the first middle-school students in the state to view Coexist, a 40-minute documentary on the 100-day period in 1994 when a half-million people were slaughtered in Rwanda, an east African country the size of Massachusetts.

The film, directed by Adam Mazo, a former TV news producer at Boston's Channel 7, shows interviews Mazo conducted with dozens of survivors of the genocide -- admitted killers and victims -- who the current Rwandan government has ordered to reconcile and coexist.

"I was shocked," said Irena, when asked about her reaction to the film. "Everybody thinks of genocide as something that happened in the distant past, not the recent past."

Following the Hollywood premiere of Coexist at the Artist Film Festival on Dec. 4, Mazo teamed with the film's "learning director," Mishy Lesser, a behavioral consultant, to take the documentary on the road.

Through word-of-mouth and online networking, Mazo and Lesser hope to be invited by schools, faith organizations and veterans groups nationwide

to screen the documentary as a learning tool and host discussions about the key "socio-emotional" issues that accompany bullying and genocide -- "revenge, coexistence, reconciliation,

how to get along, and why not to engage in 'othering,'" Lesser said.

Mazo said, "As a TV news producer by trade, I got tired of propagating fear, and I wanted to do something more constructive and work in the community to build it up instead of tearing it down.

"Last week, I was in Los Angeles for the Hollywood premiere, but to be perfectly honest, this today -- being in the school, showing the film and talking about it with the kids -- was much more meaningful," Mazo added. "This is why I began this project in the first place. It's not about spending time with celebrity types. It's about going into the classroom.

"I don't think there's anything biased about being a journalist and saying, 'I oppose bullying,'" he said. "Our ultimate goal is to make bullying socially unacceptable. It's lofty and challenging, but we think it's possible with programs like ours, in conjunction with great teachers and schools."

A day after viewing the film, students in Innovation Academy teacher Zoe Tarshis' seventh- and eighth-grade English classes gathered in the school's auditorium yesterday to discuss their impressions with Tarshis, Mazo, Lesser and each other.

Students responded to Lesser's question about their reactions to the film that took Mazo two years to raise the funds for and produce with words like "powerful," "shocking" and "sad."

The students broke into groups of five to answer Lesser's and Mazo's prepared questions about the

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genocide victims' varying reactions and the perpetrators' statements that they viewed in the film. Later, the students shared their group answers with each other.

"It doesn't mean that you actually have to kill a person, even if the government or somebody orders you to," said one eighth-grader named Ronnie.

"The role of the person Ronnie is describing would be called being an 'upstander,'" Lesser informed the assembly, adding that in the film, some people in the Rwandan genocide "got swept up from being a bystander into being either a perpetrator or an upstander."

While the film offers "no easy answers" to the way a human being should react to being made to coexist with killers and rapists who once took the lives of their loved ones and left them terrified and scarred, Lesser said Coexist sends a clear message that bullying in any form is not socially acceptable.

"This is not just an African problem," Lesser said. "Unless you do this kind of work to cultivate the socio-emotional skills that allow us to stand up against it, bullying can happen."

Lesser credited Tarshis, seventh- and eighth-grade Principal Shamus Brady and Innovation Academy Executive Director Walter Landberg for allowing the school to be among the first in the nation to host a screening and discussion of the film.

"We're hoping that this is not our last time in the Lowell area," Lesser said. "Hopefully, we can work with the middle schools and high schools in the area. We're also hoping to attract sponsors for this."

For more information, visit coexistdocumentary.org.

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