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Wiesel challenges Charlotte to act

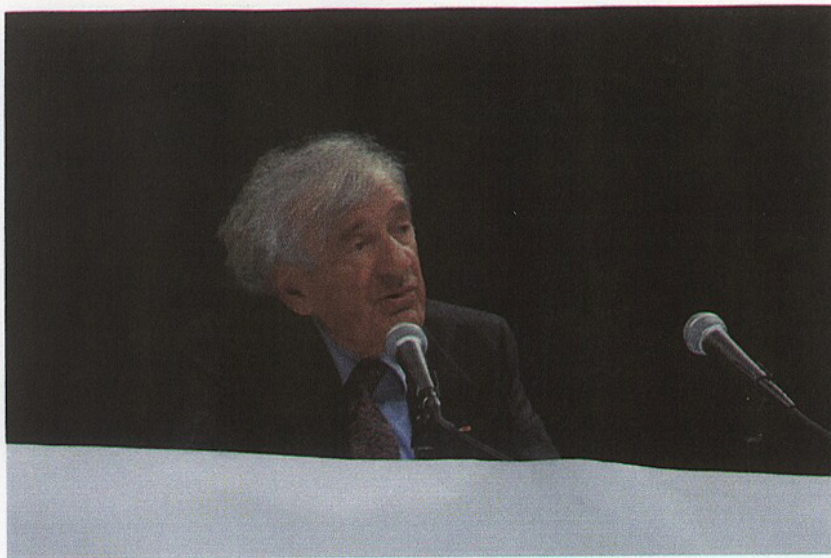
Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel autographs copies of his book "Night" for Rosenne Perez, 17, (center) and Maria Trujillo, 18, (right) on Tuesday. The Nobel Peace Prize winner, visiting Charlotte for the first time in 10 years, challenged students, religious leaders and others to make a difference by speaking out against intolerance and suffering.

"When I see a child oppressed and humiliated by poverty, I am oppressed and humiliated myself," he told more than 1,000 students from around Mecklenburg County.



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WIESEL CHALLENGES CHARLOTTE TO ACT



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Elie Wiesel speaks with students from across Charlotte. On how to pick a cause to fight for, Wiesel said, "Choose one, choose any one. Then inevitably, that will lead to others."

SIMPLE CHALLENGE: MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY TIM FUNK

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All day and into the night, they came to tap into his big-hearted wisdom: the students who stood in long lines to ask him questions, the members of the clergy who consulted him over lunch, the 2,000 patrons who paid Broadway-seat prices to hear him lecture

And what did they get Tuesday from Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner who had returned to Charlotte after a 10-year absence?

A challenge.

To do more to stop suffering.

To speak against intolerance.

And never to become dehumanized by the curse whose name is indifference," as

he told a Tuesday night audience at the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

Wiesel – a slight, wispy-haired man of 78 – issued his challenges like a moral gardener planting seeds.

After a luncheon at Duke Mansion that covered everything from the Iraq war to the growing gap between haves and have-nots, Wiesel suggested that the 20 local religious leaders – Jewish, Christian, Muslim – make Tuesday's get-together a beginning by meeting every month.

And at Myers Park High School, where he began his long day, Wiesel assured more

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Wiesel: Find a cause, make a difference

Challenge from 1B

than 1,000 students from 26 schools in Mecklenburg County and beyond that each of them could make a difference.

Many had read "Night," Wiesel's spare memoir about being a teenager in the Nazi death camps and about how he lost his mother, father, and little sister there.

One student, Kirsten from South Meck High School, asked Wiesel for advice on how to deal with the heartbreak of losing a family member – in her case, a grandfather.

"Remember him," Wiesel told her. "Remember his stories, remember his smile. And help those who suffer now, people you don't know. By helping them overcome their suffering, you will overcome your own."

Another questioner, Victoria of Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy in Mooreboro, wanted to know how students could pick among the many causes in the world.

"Choose one, choose any one," Wiesel said. "Then, inevitable, that will lead to others."

His No. 1 cause, Wiesel added, is to try to stop genocide – now in the Darfur region in Sudan, and before, in Bosnia.

"I went to Bosnia and at each house I visited, the person speaking could not continue because of the tears," Wiesel said. "I think my role in life is to go around the world and collect their tears and bring (their cause) to the world."

Critics have charged that Wiesel's strong support of Israel has made him insensitive to the suffering of Palestinians.

And on Tuesdaym two students broke the event's admiring atmosphere with pointed questions about Israel's treatment of the Palestinians.

One student, from Harding University High School, wondered if Israeli "oppression" of the Palestinians was akin to the Nazis' treatment of the Jews.

That drew a mild rebuke from Wiesel.

"You cannot compare," he said. "The 'oppression' of Jews was a decision to destroy women and children. Does anybody really believe that this is what Israel wants (to do to Palestinians)? I hope you won't (make such a comparison) again."

Later, at the clergy lunch, Wiesel said he was pleased that Muslims – often left out in such ecumenical settings – were seated around the table.

Years ago, Wiesel added, "priests, rabbis and Protestants began to work together. But they forgot the third partner: Islam. They should have invited Islam. It's never too late."

Tuesday's trip was sponsored by Charlotte's Echo Foundation, which was started 10 years ago – after Wiesel's last visit – to launch projects to echo his causes, particularly those involving children.

"The kids seemed taken with Wiesel, too.

He put a lot of thought into his message, said Shannon Spain, 17, of Hopewell High School in Huntersville. "I just kept writing and writing what he was saying.