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Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel fielded questions at Myers Park High School during a student dialogue with more than 1,000 students from Charlotte and beyond. The humanitarian urged today's youths to change the world and end indifference and intolerance.

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel to students: 'Choose an injustice'

Nobel Prize winner meets with 1,000-plus students in Charlotte

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"When was it that you realized that you needed to devote your life to the elimination of injustice and oppression around the world?"

Katie Cavins, a South Mecklenburg High School sophomore, fidgeted with the question she penned as she anxiously waited to participate in a student dialogue with Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate for Peace.

"I'm so excited. Even if I don't get to ask him, I think it will be cool to hear everyone's questions and hear him answer," said Katie, one of 1,000 students from 25 regional public and private middle and high schools, as well as students and teachers representing 28 additional schools from across the country. They all hoped to speak to the humanitarian at Myers Park High School on Tuesday, March 27. "It really makes you think about what you could do in this world, because he has done so much," she said.

With security tight to protect the famed 78-year-old scholar, the small-framed Wiesel, with his shock of white, mussed hair, appeared onstage to thunderous applause and a standing ovation. Each student in attendance, ages 13 to 18, had read Wiesel's internationally acclaimed "Night" about his experiences in Nazi death camps. Each waited with a thoughtful, teacher-approved question to pose to the author. Each

could sense the undeniable charge of energy in the air.

Each was handpicked to attend and completed a yearlong, in-depth study on the work and life of Wiesel. The dialogue spotlighted urgent current-day issues, the impact one person can make and the global cost of complacency when people remain indifferent to suffering and injustice.

Although soft-spoken and with a thick Eastern-European accent, Wiesel did not mince words.

When one of at least 150 students who lined the aisles to ask a question probed Wiesel on how to pick a cause, he calmly replied, "Choose one. Choose any one. But choose one. We need more voices. Today, my priority is Darfur."

When a Charlotte Country Day School student asked what was the one thing the Boston University professor sees in life that touches his heart most, he answered without hesitation: children. "I see a child oppressed, humiliated by pain and each time I'm oppressed and humiliated. I will never forget what people can do to children," Wiesel said.

The Romanian-born professor has seen much. The Nazis deported Wiesel and his family to Auschwitz when he was 15. His mother and younger sister perished; his two older sisters survived. Wiesel and his father were later transported to Buchenwald, where his father died shortly before the camp was liberated in 1945. Wiesel later moved to France, where he became a journal-

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ist and began his writing career. Now a U.S. citizen, he writes in French; he teaches in English.

He spent a good portion of the dialogue fielding questions about those who deny the Holocaust's existence. "Those who abuse the memory are Holocaust deniers. It's not only a lie but an offense to us all," Wiesel said. "I simply don't deal with them. The Holocaust was one of the most documented events in history. They found journals about how Nazis competed to see how many Jews they could kill in one week. I ignore ... the deniers. ... They are not mentally insane, but morally insane."

On the war in Iraq, he admitted that he initially supported President Bush's plans. "I don't think he wanted to invade but he wanted to destroy weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein was a mass murderer, there's no question. If he had weapons of mass destruction, he was a danger to Iraq, the United States, to the world," Wiesel said. "There was not an intelligence agency in the world who didn't think he had weapons of mass destruction. But then it became a war and now it's a mess. Now the question is how to get out."

Stephanie Ansaldo, president of The Echo Foundation, recalled Wiesel's visit to Charlotte 10 years ago when he participated in a student dialogue at Charlotte Latin (see next week's issue of Charlotte Weekly for features editor Regan White's recollections on his first visit). "He said to me in the car on the way to the airport, 'Stephanie, you can't stop now. You must do more. And I will help you.'" The Echo Foundation in Charlotte was born, and Wiesel's visit this week was to celebrate its anniversary and its Voices Against Indifference Initiative. The educational program brings to Charlotte speakers whose personal experiences illuminate how one person can make a positive difference for humanity.

In preparation for his visit, the foundation collaborated with educators, students and community leaders to create an interactive educational program. Components of The Elie Wiesel Project included high school art and writing competitions in French and English, curriculum materials for edu-

cators, a teacher workshop and Humanity's Day for students.

Following the two-and-a-half-hour dialogue, Wiesel spoke with media and praised the foundation's decade of work. "I didn't expect it to go so fast, for them to do so much," he said. "I applaud them for that."

He added that it was important to speak to students and remind them that they can make a difference every day. "I speak now as an old person of the 20th century. This century is their century. It is up to us to prepare them for the century we have given them," he said.

This past fall, Wiesel addressed the United Nations Security Council, urging action to help the people of Darfur, labeling it "the world capital of human suffering, humiliation and despair." Wiesel also has defended the cause of Soviet and Ethiopian Jews, Nicaragua's Miskito Indians, Argentina's Desaparecidos, Cambodian refugees, the Kurds, victims of famine and genocide in Africa, victims of apartheid in South Africa and victims of war in the former Yugoslavia. He also is a devoted supporter of Israel.

His accomplishments are too many to list. "Night," a must-read among many high school students nationwide, has been translated into more than 30 languages. Wiesel also has authored more than 40 books of fiction and non-fiction, and has received more than 100 honorary degrees from institutions of higher learning.

While 16-year-old Katie of South Mecklenburg High didn't get to speak to Wiesel, she fingered a card from The Echo Foundation. Each card had a different challenge and every student received one when they entered the auditorium. Katie's read "Consider donating to www.locksoflove.org," referring to the organization that takes hair donations to make wigs for financially disadvantaged children suffering from long-term medical hair loss.

"My sister just donated her hair to Locks of Love," she said. "It's really weird to get that particular card. I've been thinking about it for a while. I think someone is trying to tell me something. I think I'll grow mine out just a bit more so it won't be so short when they cut it." □