



Reaching Out to End Genocide

By Sejal Hathr

MY FRIENDS AND I FORMED AN ACTION TEAM UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF GIRLS FOR A CHANGE, A NATIONAL NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION THAT SEEKS TO EMPOWER GIRLS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.



Mass killings, torture, arbitrary arrest, the torching of entire villages and communities: in a word, genocide. In the Darfur region of western Sudan, over 400,000 people have lost their lives and over two million others have been driven from their homes in a catastrophic humanitarian crisis that has crippled the country. Since

February of 2003, the government-sponsored Janjawid militias have been waging an increasingly ferocious and merciless war against two revolutionary movements, the Sudan Liberation Movement and the Justice and Equality Movement, who have been protesting the government's neglect of their people. Hundreds of thousands more are at risk every day as rains worsen and roads become impossible for humanitarian agencies.

Many citizens, and sadly, a number of peoples and governments worldwide are growing despairingly immune to the violence. But reading and learning about the rapidly deteriorating conditions in Darfur on the contrary moved me and a team of likeminded girls in my community to raise awareness and support a nonprofit organization working to aid women and children victims of the crisis.

Youth Service America is an organization that offers support for youth service projects. Their indispensable inspiration and guidance in the campaign to develop a youth voice and awareness of global issues has encouraged millions of young people like me to study the world more intently to reveal problems and in turn work to alleviate them. An active member of YSA's National Youth Council, I have been convinced to believe in youth potential to solve even the most seemingly overwhelming problems facing the world. It is with this firm conviction and empowerment bestowed by my growth and experience with YSA that my friends and I embarked on our campaign to end genocide.

My team's first step to constructing a viable project in our community was to research the crisis even further and develop a comprehensive binder of the latest news and reports surrounding the international community's response to the genocide. We became a member of multiple nonprofit organizations seeking to make change and attended local "Darfur Days" and "Darfur Seminars" to enrich our understanding of the conflict and its participants. Through our networking, we were able to contact a number of expert speakers on the genocide to present at the Darfur Benefit we had decided to hold. Simon and Joel Deng of the Lost Boys of Sudan; Gerri Miller of the Bay Area Save Darfur Coalition; and Lloyd Sacks, a former United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization officer, all agreed to share their knowledge at our event. We also solicited a myriad of other nonprofits to set up informational booths during the day, and were partially successful in our efforts.

"DOZENS IN OUR COMMUNITY EMERGED FROM THEIR EXPERIENCE ENLIGHTENED AND INSPIRED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE"

After researching worthy humanitarian organizations working on the field in Darfur, my team finally selected the Sudan-Reach Women's Foundation as the agency we felt most suited to receive our funds: Since 2004, Sudan-Reach has worked with hundreds of families in Darfur to provide direct aid, counseling, education, and healthcare assistance to women and children refugees. Sudan-Reach was supportive of our efforts to raise awareness and mailed us informational flyers, brochures, donation boxes, and other educational materials to distribute at our event, which we titled "Destitute but Determined: The Darfur Story."

If you would like to learn more about the genocide in Darfur, there are numerous activist organizations looking for new members. Be sure to check out websites like: www.sudanreach.org www.savedarfur.org www.standnow.org www.darfurgenocide.org www.globefordarfur.org



Having already applied for and received support from a few grants, our final and most critical action was to advertise: on the radio, on Facebook, on MySpace, in local and school newspapers, anywhere we could spread awareness and cultivate interest of our event. My team produced flyers and brochures of our own which we posted in local stores, businesses, libraries, and schools. Through our tireless networking and overtures to local media agencies, the word of our event spread.

Our awareness campaign was an enormous success: because teachers in many schools in the area had made it an extra credit assignment for their students to learn about a pressing social issue, entire classes came to our event in addition to various community members and other Darfur advocates. In all of the evaluations we received, and by speaking to the participants, we were commended for our efforts to attract public attention to a problem so atrocious yet so blatantly disregarded by our society and our

leaders. More than simply a benefit to raise money, we were told, our project had served as a piercing but vital epiphany: dozens in our community emerged from their experience enlightened and inspired to make a difference.



IF YOU TOO WOULD LIKE TO ACTIVELY RAISE AWARENESS AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE, HERE ARE A FEW SIMPLE WAYS YOU CAN GET INVOLVED IN THIS GLOBAL CAMPAIGN TO END GENOCIDE, ONE LITTLE STEP AT A TIME:

- 01** Organize a Dollar-for-Darfur Day at your school or college: create a fundraising campaign among the student body and faculty at your school by requesting each person to bring in at least one dollar to pledge to ending the genocide in Darfur. You can hang posters around campus and hold lunchtime activities and talks to educate your school community and therefore inspire them to donate to your cause.
- 02** Organize a film screening that showcases a documentary about Darfur: There are numerous organizations out there beseeching you to showcase their films about the devastation ravaging Darfur: *God Grew Tired of Us*, *Darfur Diaries*, and *Living with Refugees* are just a few documentaries you can access online or purchase screening rights for. You can hold reflection sessions after the film to animate people's thoughts and reactions to what they learned and saw.
- 03** Organize a discussion forum within your school, club, organization, or community to educate and raise awareness about the genocide. Many organizations like STAND (www.standnow.org) are eager to send you informational materials or otherwise assist you in implementing such events.
- 04** Distribute flyers and brochures in your local libraries, coffee shops, or public bulletin boards: these brochures you can obtain directly by contacting various humanitarian agencies and requesting a certain number of copies, or you can perform research for your own benefit and compile resources of your own.
- 05** Write letters and petitions to your local and state officials to lobby for increased U.S. involvement in the peacekeeping force in Sudan: you can find templates for such petitions online, for example at www.petitiononline.com/samhamam/petition.html and coalitionfordarfurvr.blogspot.com/2005/12/petition.html for ideas.
- 06** Read, join nonprofit organizations, research—LEARN about the genocide to determine your unique way of making change.