



War Child Canada founder speaks at Freedom Day

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TORONTO — About 3,000 Ontario middle and high school students gathered last week at Yonge-Dundas Square in Toronto to celebrate Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies' (FSWC) third annual Freedom Day.

Freedom Day, held each year on Sept. 20, the anniversary of Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal's death, aims to promote the need to share Canadian values of democracy, human rights and freedom with others around the world.

FSWC president and CEO Avi Benlolo took to the stage to welcome the students, saying he was thrilled to see so many people gathered "in the name of freedom and in the name of democracy and in the name of improving the world one step at a time.

"We must all work hard to try to spread freedom and spread knowledge and understanding, fight oppression, fight hate and fight intolerance wherever it persists," Benlolo added.

Throughout the event, students were entertained by Entertainment Tonight Canada co-host Rick Campanelli, who hosted the event, singer Marlowe Stone, and the Sole Power dancers.

Award-winning composer Zane Zalis was joined on stage by two soloists who performed his Holocaust-themed oratorios *I Believe* and *I Have a Name*.

But the entertainment was broken up by speakers who aimed to galvanize the students to help those who are victimized by violent war and oppression.

Keynote speaker Samantha Nutt – founder of War Child Canada, a medical doctor, an award-winning humanitarian, author, speaker and a leading authority on the impact of war – told the students that each of them is capable of making an extraordinary contribution to humanitarian issues if they choose to.

“I understand how easy it is for all of us living here to think about what’s happening in other parts of the world and feel as if we are powerless to do anything about it,” Nutt said, adding that there are currently 28 ongoing conflicts.

“Five million people have died in the war in the Congo over the past 13 years, 300,000 have died in Darfur, thousands have died in the recent conflict in Syria, hundreds of thousands have died in the conflict in Iraq – the numbers are overwhelming,” she said.

During one of her visits to Darfur with her organization, War Child Canada, Nutt said that she, too, wrestled with thoughts of helplessness and powerlessness.

She spoke about the current situation in Darfur, where over the past eight years, 300,000 people have been murdered and two million more have been forced from their homes to live in overcrowded, disease-ridden refugee camps.

“When you’re meeting people who live in Darfur... it is easy for anyone to feel overwhelmed and feel like anything you will ever do will never make that much of a difference... I think we are too often paralyzed by our unwillingness to even try,” Nutt said.

“But it is possible, by questioning our assumptions and challenging the status quo and steadfastly refusing to be silent in the face of injustice, to speak up, speak out and to defy those who seek to perpetuate hate and resentment and animosity and crimes against humanity.”

Franco Ntazinda, a Rwandan-born refugee who immigrated to Canada in 1986, spoke about the Rwandan genocide in 1994 that killed most of his extended family that chose to stay behind in Rwanda.

As someone who experienced life in an oppressive country, and now thrives in a free country, Ntazinda expressed how much he cherishes the freedoms most Canadians take for granted.

He recalled the first time he voted in a Canadian election.

“It was like yesterday... I was the first in line to vote. To know that my vote would count made me feel like I was somebody. Ever since, I have never missed a chance to cast my ballot,” he said.

Mario Silva, chair of the 2012 Task Force for International Co-operation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, also addressed the gathering, focusing his

speech on the legacy of Simon Wiesenthal and the importance of carrying on his mission to keep the memory of the Holocaust and all other genocides alive.

Frank Chalk, founding co-director of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, and a history professor at Concordia University, used poetry to emphasize the importance of promoting human rights.