

Burundi Survivor Appeals to Youth

By Eileen O. Daday Daily Herald Correspondent
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A survivor from Central Africa's war-torn Burundi made a pitch to St. Viator High School students to help him rebuild his country.

Prosper Ndabishuriye spoke to almost 100 history students in the school's chapel Wednesday, telling them of the large-scale killing and destruction that has ravaged his tiny country, which sits next to Rwanda, and of his plans to heal it.

"We believe that through youth like you we can build the world and the society we want," Ndabishuriye told them. "You are able to help. You are the leaders of tomorrow. You are very important."

Ndabishuriye said his goal was to inform the students of his country's situation and encourage them to make a contribution, both by engaging their interest in the project and securing their willingness to form an exchange with a school in Burundi.

"It's just interesting meeting a person who's lived there and seeing about it through his eyes," said sophomore Heather Holzer, 15, of Palatine. "You learn so much more than just reading about it in a book."

"Now I know that there's this mission going on, and that by contributing so little you can do so much," added sophomore Michael Pennisi, 16, of Des Plaines.

Ndabishuriye's presentation was the first to a Chicago-area school. Through a partnership between his organization, "Youth in Reconstruction of the World in Destruction," and The Heritage Institute in Clinton, Wash., he already has six Seattle-area schools on board.

The goals of the Africa American Exchange, explained Mike Seymour of The Heritage Institute, are to help the Burundi people rebuild their homes, develop youth leaders and draw more international involvement.

Students learned of the country's civil war that started in 1993 between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes. It has resulted in almost a half-million deaths and 60 percent of homes destroyed.

Starting in 1994, Nbadishuriye and others formed a nongovernmental organization, supported by the United Nations, to begin rebuilding homes. In the process, they have recruited young men willing to do the work.

"Destruction in our country has been at a high level," Ndadishuriye said. "Everywhere you go you see destruction. ... But there is hope for tomorrow."

Since they began, they have built 1,500 mud-brick homes - at \$700 apiece - and are in the process of trying to build another 800.

"The young people in Burundi are very moved by your interest and your involvement," Ndabishuriye said. "We are happy now because there is hope."

Tom Nall, the history teacher who secured the visit, said it was the first speaker sponsored by his Social Action Tribe, a school-sponsored club.

"When you take what you've learned in the classroom and apply it toward social justice," Nall said, "that is the highest form of education."

To find out more about the reconstruction project, go to www.jrmd.org.
Learn more about the Africa America Exchange at www.hol.edu/aax.