

The Charlotte Observer

www.charlotte.com

12 follow in Elie Wiesel's steps

Film traces local students' journey to where Elie Wiesel survived the Holocaust.

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Posted: Sunday, Sep. 19, 2010

As the sun sneaks up past the clouds, announcing a new day, we see a dozen teenagers sitting quietly outside a sprawling redbrick building.

It looks at first glance like a deserted factory. But as the camera roams, taking in the barbed-wire fences and the eerily familiar watchtower, we know these 12 Charlotte high school students are about to step inside Birkenau, perhaps the most infamous of the Nazi concentration camps.

They have come to Poland to trace the footsteps of Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner who was a teenager himself when he and his Jewish family were loaded into cattle cars almost 70 years ago and taken to this factory of death.

As the film continues, we see the students with pen and paper. After solemnly inspecting the ovens, the stacks of bunk beds, the mass of abandoned shoes, they begin writing: "Dear Professor Wiesel..."

On Tuesday night, Wiesel - who answered each of those letters - will return to Charlotte for the premiere of "In the Footsteps of Elie Wiesel," the 51-minute documentary that tells the story of the Charlotte students' 2007 journey. After the film, Wiesel will hold an on-stage dialogue with 12 students - including three who were at Birkenau.



The film, sponsored by Charlotte's Echo Foundation, which also organized the trip, follows the students to other places: to Sighet, Romania, where Wiesel was born, and to Versailles, France, where he landed in an orphanage after the camps were liberated in 1945.

But Wiesel, who turns 82 next week, told the Observer that the film is really about the students. And it affirms a connection to young people that he's forged over the years. A longtime Boston University professor, his 1958 memoir of the death camps, "Night," is among the most widely read books in U.S. high schools.

And during his trips to Charlotte, where he's honorary chair of the Echo Foundation, he always meets with students.

Watching "In the Footsteps of Elie Wiesel," he said in a phone interview last week, taught him anew how young people can teach the rest of us.

"I simply watched the students and I realized that their eagerness is something that I should take into account," he said. "After all, I've spent more than 40 years of my life amongst students. I feel very close to them. Whatever they do - their questions, their discoveries, their reactions - it's always very moving."

The film's climax is the students' visit to Birkenau, where all we hear on the soundtrack is the mournful chanting of Cantor Joseph Malovany, who sings "Ani Ma'amin" - "Even in the Darkness, I Believe."

Interspersed with the scenes of the students are black-and-white photos of emaciated victims of the Holocaust, many of them children and teenagers. Some roll up their sleeves to show their Nazi-tattooed numbers, others stand behind the barbed wire. They wear haunting faces and prison stripes.

The Charlotte students' letters from this place where so many were slaughtered - including Wiesel's mother, father and youngest sister - were unforgettable, Wiesel said.

"To go ... to those places at their age meant something in their lives," he said. "It's going to be a watershed. I'm sure they'll think about it 10 years, or 20 years from now, and they'll say, 'There was a before and after.'"

Casey Horgan, who was on the trip and will be on stage with Wiesel on Tuesday, can already testify to that.

"I don't think I'll ever again have an experience that powerful," said Horgan, a Myers Park High School graduate who's now 20 and a sophomore at Boston University. "I lost track of space and time."

She framed Wiesel's handwritten response to her letter.

"You will make a difference," Wiesel wrote. "I share your sense of urgency in responding to the suffering of others and making sure that the atrocities of the past never happen again."

Some of the students who went on the trip are already out there having an impact. One example: Natasha Frosina, a graduate of Providence Day. She can't be part of Tuesday's event because she's in Uganda and Rwanda, living with local families and studying how those African countries have been transformed in the aftermath of war and conflict. (Her blog: <http://natashafrosina.wordpress.com>.)

The chosen 12

The Echo Foundation, founded in 1997 to launch projects that echoed Wiesel's message to guard against indifference, got 60 applicants from Mecklenburg County high school students after announcing its 2007 global initiative - a yearlong study followed by the Footsteps journey to Europe.

The foundation was looking for devoted students who had demonstrated a commitment to social justice, said Stephanie Ansaldo, the foundation's president, who started Echo after Wiesel's 1997 trip to Charlotte. Twelve were chosen.

The diverse group met frequently and studied the Holocaust and Wiesel's life. They became a team.

On July 18, 2007, they left for Europe, taking their journals, leaving their iPods behind.

From the beginning, filming the two-week trip, was a four-person film crew from Charlotte's Indievision and Emulsion Arts. They returned with 54 hours of footage.

The finished film tells two parallel stories: One charting Wiesel's life, from the boy marked for death to the Nobel Prize-winning humanitarian, the other following the students on their inward journey as they walk in his footsteps.

Ansaldo, who accompanied the students, also tried to give them a hint of what Holocaust victims experienced. In one scene, she has the students crowd in uncomfortably close, while she describes the claustrophobic conditions in the cattle cars. In another scene, she asks the students to imagine that a Nazi soldier is rapping on the door, ready to take their loved ones away.

Punctuating the film are interviews and journal readings that reveal what the students are feeling.

On their expectations: "Our lives are very sheltered," says Evelyn Denham, then 17 and a student at North Mecklenburg High. "And being able to see what has gone into shaping (Wiesel), maybe will give us inspiration to go do something in the world."

At Wiesel's boyhood home: "What is left when they take the childhood from the child?" writes Gabby Reed, then 16 and a student at East Mecklenburg High. "The love from the lover? The peace from the person who strives for harmony above all things?"

And a final word back home: "It's easy to say, 'I'd like to get involved, but I don't have time right now. And I'll do it later.'" says Maggie Love, then 16 and a student at North Mecklenburg High. "I'd like to get the word out to other people that you do have time to save human lives."

Vision: Inspire audiences

After seeing the film, Wiesel asked for no changes - save one.

Take out the recording of him singing "Ani Ma'amin."

"I'm not really a singer; I'm a writer," he told Ansaldo.

Wiesel then called Malovany, his friend and the cantor at New York's Fifth Avenue synagogue, an Orthodox schul that Wiesel attends.

Malovany flew to Charlotte to record at Concentrix Music and Sound Design in Cotswold.

At the end of the session, Ansaldo, noting the intimate nature of the film, asked Malovany to sing a lullaby that would play over the credits.

He didn't know one. So he composed one on the spot.

In Yiddish, he sang a lullaby he named "To Eliezer," Wiesel's formal first name.

Also contributing: actor Richard Gere, a Wiesel friend who reads the film's introduction.

Ansaldo says the finished film is now being translated into French and German, and has been accepted by film festivals in Oregon and Germany.

It'll have a premiere in New York - Wiesel's home - next spring, and the hope is that, eventually, it will be seen in high schools around the world.

Ansaldo wants those who see it to take away the message that "It's our moral obligation to discover which talents we have that the world needs and then do something good."

As for Wiesel, his vision is that, like the students, audiences will be inspired. "To live through these important and meaningful times with a sense of obligation and commitment toward others and to not be indifferent to their joy or their fear or their hope."