

BULLETINS

Preparing To Follow Elie Wiesel's Footsteps

Posted: February 5th, 2010

Greg Lacour

The Echo Foundation, a humanitarian and educational organization in Charlotte, exists because of Elie Wiesel.

It was founded on Wiesel's suggestion after the internationally renowned professor, activist and Holocaust survivor visited Charlotte in 1997. Since then, The Echo Foundation has hosted prominent humanitarians and developed educational programs for students.



This year, the foundation is preparing for the release of perhaps its most ambitious project, "In the Footsteps of Elie Wiesel," a 56- minute documentary that follows a group of 12 Charlotte high school students who traveled to Europe during the summer of 2007 to learn about Wiesel's life. Over 12 days, they traced Wiesel's journey from his birthplace in Romania to the concentration camp at Auschwitz in Poland to Versailles, where he was given refuge after World War II, to Berlin, where new generations of Germans are trying to atone for the sins of their forebears.

The film will premiere March 24 at East Mecklenburg High School, where students have been studying the Holocaust and human rights issues in preparation for the film. As part of the preparation, on Feb. 3, about 650 high school students from 14 CMS campuses attended The Echo Foundation's Humanity's Day, an annual school event that this year focused on lessons from the Holocaust.

A trailer for the film preceded a panel discussion with Holocaust survivor Susan Cernyak-Spatz, her daughter Jackie Fishman and Echo Foundation President Stephanie Ansaldo. Cernyak-Spatz was born in Vienna, Austria, and spent two years, from January 1943 to January 1945, at Auschwitz. She lives in the Charlotte area and has taught a class

on the Holocaust at UNC Charlotte; she published her memoir, “Protective Custody: Prisoner 34042,” in 2005.

Cernyak-Spatz explained to an auditorium of somber teenagers that she was one of the lucky ones. She was young and healthy enough to work, for one thing; the sick, weak, old and infirm were sent to the crematoria. For another, she was sent to the main Auschwitz labor camp as opposed to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka or Majdanek. Those existed for one purpose only – extermination.

It still was a brutal existence. “Minute by minute,” Cernyak-Spatz told the students, “you had to decide whether to live or die.”



After the panel, students separated into groups to discuss ethical and human rights issues and how they inform life today. A student had asked Cernyak-Spatz whether she anticipates that the 21st century will be better and more humane than the 20th.

Cernyak-Spatz said she didn’t know. “We can only hope that eventually we will come to a point where...humanity will be polite and civil to each other.”

But she pointed to the political atmosphere in the United States, in which the political parties have staked out their positions and seem incapable of working together to solve common problems. “We seem to have reached an age of incivility,” Cernyak-Spatz said. “Frankly, I’m a little skeptical.”