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Wiesel urges audience to follow footsteps to peace

The Nobel laureate attended a new film about students who retraced his journey.

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Nobel Peace laureate Elie Wiesel took the stage at Charlotte's Knight Theater on Tuesday night, answering student panelists' questions about making a difference in a suffering world. In the process, he called on the black-tie audience to embrace the stranger, reach out to the lonely, and commit their lives to alleviating the pain of others.



The world's most famous Holocaust survivor, Wiesel said he could have spent his life just writing books about his own suffering. Besides having much of his childhood stolen by the Nazis, he lost his parents and youngest sister in the death camps.

Instead, Wiesel said, he wrote one book about his own life - "Night," a 1958 memoir of his year in the camps - and then spent the rest of his career writing about and acting on the pain of others.

"Because it happened to me, I must take care of people who suffer today," he said, then offered this advice to the students and the crowd of more than 800: "Don't live your own life unless it is linked to someone else's."

This "Night to Remember," as the sponsoring Echo Foundation dubbed it, was also laced with a few laughs, as Wiesel, wearing a corduroy tuxedo and a shock of wild wispy hair, occasionally dropped witticisms.

Bragging at one point that only one of his thousands of students had ever gone into politics, he added later, with a mischievous smile: "I'm a teacher and a writer. That means I live my life with questions. Politicians have answers."

Wiesel, who turns 82 next week, cracked up the audience after revealing that Bantam, the publisher of the paperback edition of "Night," had sold 6million copies in 20 years.

"And that was before Oprah!" he said.

Tuesday night's uptown event opened with the premiere of "In the Footsteps of Elie Wiesel." The documentary film is about a dozen Charlotte high school students who traced his life during a 2007 European journey that included a visit to Birkenau - one of the most notorious Nazi concentration camps. It's where Wiesel, then a teenager himself, was taken nearly 70 years ago after being loaded into a cattle car with other Jews - including the rest of his family.

The local students on stage, including a survivor of the Bosnian genocide and a few young people featured in the film, asked Wiesel about everything from his novels to current bigotry against Muslims.

Wiesel promised the students no definitive answers, but his responses were passionate.

On schools: "More than anything I believe in education. ... We should give the teachers a higher salary."

On American nativism and the suspicion of those who are different: "The hatred of the stranger - I'm against it. The stranger is not my enemy. He has to be my friend, my ally. I love the stranger for his stories."

On scorn for undocumented immigrants: "A human being cannot be illegal. He can do something illegal. But a being cannot be illegal."

Wiesel also seemed in the mood at times to assess his long life, and what impact he's had. He singled out the day he persuaded the president of Germany to publicly ask Jews for forgiveness for the genocide during its Third Reich. He said his book and action on behalf of Soviet Jews helped lead to a breakthrough, when millions emigrated to Israel.

"It helped liberate those people," Wiesel said, then added in what could be a summation of what he has tried to do with life: "It helped give them a sense of their own value, a sense of their own future."