

Students learn of horrors of rape, war in Africa

BY LAYLA FARMER
THE CHRONICLE

"They told me to choose between rape and death. I could choose neither—it is the same."

The words of the late Helene Wamuzila, a Congolese woman are encapsulated in the gut wrenching documentary, "Women in War Zones: Sexual Violence in the Congo," a haunting reminder of the agony an estimated 2 million women in her native country know all too well.

Wamuzila, who was 22 when the documentary was made several years ago, later died of AIDS, one of many repercussions she suffered as a result of the brutal sexual attacks she endured. Wamuzila's story is one of two highlighted in the documentary, which was directed by Scott Blanding, an American activist. Blanding's brother, Johnny Blanding, was on hand at Wake Forest Tuesday evening to screen the film, an intimate look at the effects of the violent sexual assaults that are being perpetrated against Congolese women and girls by "all armed groups" involved in the conflict that persists there, according to Blanding. Following the attacks, the victims are often ostracized by their families and communities, and sometimes even barred from attending school. Blanding reported.

"It was really striking for me to be here receiving an education just because I am in the right place, born to the right people at the right time," Mari Holman, a 21-year-old WFU senior, commented after viewing the



Johnny Blanding addresses students and faculty members at Wake Forest Tuesday.

film. "Just seeing the loss of innocence in the girls' faces who are my age (was difficult)."

Dr. Wanda Balzano, director of Women's and Gender Studies, also expressed shock at the horrific nature of the film's subject matter.

"It's hard for everyone to respond," she told Blanding as the audience sat in stunned silence after the film's conclusion. "It's hard for words to come out, even."

The film, which did not show any violence or nudity, but accounted the trials of the women after the fact, was meant to make viewers uncomfortable, said Blanding, 29.

"We really just wanted to tell a very raw story. It's very personal, almost as if you were there yourself,"



Blanding (center) poses with Linda Mecum, Administrative Coordinator for Women's and Gender Studies (left) and Dr. Wanda Balzano, director of the program.

said the Roanoke native. "I think it's convicting and we mean for it to be. I firmly believe that whenever we see anything horrible in this world, we are commanded to go serve and care about God's creation."

The goal of the film is to raise awareness about the countless innocent women who are suffering in the Congo and to garner support

for the Wamu Center. The Center, which Scott Blanding founded and named in Wamuzila's memory, offers support to Congolese rape victims and the physicians who care for them through a variety of services, including a general library and a medical library, a trauma-focused cognitive behavior therapy program and a technology lab. The Center

three siblings and funded by donations, is encouraging young Condolese rape victims to pursue degrees in the medical field to help regain their status within their communities.

"We really believe that we're going to radically change the country and the girls that were ostracized," Johnny told the students that crowded DeTamble Auditorium in the school's Tribble Hall.

Balzano said she and the students in her Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies class will be discussing the film in depth in an upcoming class. She added that it was important to connect the dots between the atrocities they study in class and the lives that are forever changed by such acts.

"It's always something we should know more about, particularly at a place like Wake Forest, which is like a bubble, so it's important for us to get educated," she remarked. "I think they can see that the things we saw in the books, the women who suffer in the books that we are studying, have real faces and these issues are real issues. We cannot all travel to the Congo, but to have someone like (Blanding) coming here, it makes the reality more evident to us."

For more information, or to volunteer or donate to Women in War Zones, visit www.womeninwarzones.org or find them on Facebook.



Holman

offers classes and tutoring and sometimes even foots the bill for younger girls to return to school, Johnny Blanding said.

"This has been an incredible project just because of the strength and tenacity of the women involved," related the Liberty University alumnus. "There is so much hope and so much oneness among everybody."

Scott Blanding, who now lives in Los Angeles, is hoping to get the documentary made into a feature film, which would donate more funds for the Center's work. The Women in War Zones organization, which is led jointly by Scott and his

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MARK SHRIVER

MISSION TO SERVE

Mark Kennedy Shriver comes to Wake Forest in the tradition of Pro Humanitate to speak about the American mission of serving others, particularly in relation to the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps. His father, Sargent Shriver, brother-in-law of President John F. Kennedy, was the driving force behind and first administrator of the Peace Corps. Shriver served two four-year terms as a member of the Maryland House of Delegates, was Maryland's first Chair of the Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families and currently is senior vice-president of U.S. Programs for Save the Children.

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