

The Charlotte JEWISH news

Vol. 29, No. 5

Iyar-Sivan 5767

May 2007

An Affiliate of the Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte

“God May Be Unjust and Unfair... But God Is Not Indifferent”

Elie Wiesel Comes to Charlotte to Commemorate ECHO Foundation's Award Against Indifference

ECHO Foundation Celebrates A Decade Inspired by Elie Wiesel

By Amy Krakovitz

What surprises you is that this giant is really a very small man. Not more than 5'4", his skin ruddy and sun-touched, his shock of white hair unkempt and wind-blown, he belies his largesse.

What doesn't surprise you is that almost everything he says is quotable, a proverb, a motto to live by. And live by it, he does. He is not a phony, a charlatan, a scam artist. He is truly everything represented by his reputation and more.

He is Elie Wiesel, author, activist, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, scholar, teacher, and Jew. And several of us in Charlotte were fortunate enough to spend most of two days in his presence.

Wiesel arrived in Charlotte at the behest of the Echo Foundation, an organization founded with his help and encouragement. Ten years ago, Wiesel spoke here and on his trip back to airport after that visit, he spoke to Stephanie Ansaldo, then on the staff of Charlotte Latin School, the sponsoring organization for his initial visit. It can't end here, he told her, you have to continue to bring

Foundation began awarding activists in Charlotte with the Award Against Indifference. This year's recipient was Sally Dalton Robinson. Additionally, the Echo Foundation awards the Young Heroes of Hope Award to emerging humanitarian leaders. This year's recipient was Benjamin Smolen, a graduate of Myers Park High School, and currently a senior at Princeton University. Inspired by the Echo Foundation's 2003 program with Earth Institute Director Jeffrey Sachs, Benjamin created S.T.A.N.D. (Student Tolerance and Non-Discrimination), a coalition of social and environmental issues groups. At Princeton, Benjamin organized a benefit concert for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Benjamin's grandmother is a member of Temple Beth El.

Teach Your Children

A great deal of Wiesel's short time in Charlotte was spent among students: high school, college and elementary school. He believes strongly that education is the key to changing the world.



Henry Hirschmann with Elie Wiesel at the Patron's Reception. Photo by Bobby Cochran courtesy ECHO Foundation.

"It will be a great experience to be with someone outstanding like him," said Shayna Bernstein, a sophomore from East Mecklenburg High School, before the program began. "I want my peers to grasp what happened [during the Holocaust] and help it to never happen again."

That seemed to be the general attitude among the Jewish students in the auditorium. Their focus on what they wanted to hear from Wiesel was mostly directed toward his Holocaust experience.

But as we learned when he finally took the stage, he is so much more than a Holocaust survivor.

He was introduced by Rabbi Judith Schindler of Temple Beth El, who received a warm hug upon Wiesel's stage entrance. He was a dear friend of her father's, he said, he so admired Alexander Schindler. After a brief greeting, he immediately began taking questions from the high school students.

The questions were thoughtful, polite, and intelligent. The responses were sincere and profound.

When asked what has touched his heart the most, Wiesel replied, "Seeing children oppressed by poverty, starvation and pain."

What can we do to keep the Holocaust memory alive for new and future generations? "I am not worried that it will be forgotten. I am worried that it will be trivialized, cheapened and commercialized."

Asked about his support of Israel and Zionism: "I am for

Israel. I am very sad for all the missed opportunities by the Palestinians."

Confronted by so many places and people all over the world needing help from poverty, injustice, and death, one student asked how to decide on what to focus their efforts. "Choose one ... today my focus is Darfur."

Whose responsibility is it to take care of global issues? "All of us!"

When asked whether he still resented Germans: "I don't believe in collective guilt. The children of the killers are not the killers of children."

The question and answer period went on for over an hour. The event concluded with a presentation of gifts from students in the area. One gift was 1,000 books to be presented to Beit

Russia are being suppressed, groups disbanded and arrested ..."

Against Indifference Lecture

The evening at Founder's Hall began with a Middle East style buffet and a roomful of people, both elated and excited in anticipation of Elie Wiesel's upcoming speech.

The Lead Program Sponsor was The Leon Levine Foundation: Sandra and Leon Levine. Sandra and Leon were on hand to accept the thanks of The Echo Foundation's chair, Mark Erwin. It was during this time that Sally Dalton Robinson was awarded the 2007 Echo Foundation Award Against Indifference.

The program in the Belk Theater began with a musical performance by the Charlotte Children's Choir joined by the children from Temple Israel. They performed an arrangement of *Ani Ma'Amin* and "An Inscription of Hope." The introduction to the



With the students of the Charlotte Jewish Day School. Photo by Jeff Cravotta courtesy ECHO Foundation.

Tziporah, a school for Ethiopian immigrants in Israel that was named for Wiesel's sister who perished in the Holocaust.

The session with the students was followed by a brief meeting with members of the media. At this event, this reporter was able to ask questions that came from our Hebrew High students. Kenny Gould, a sophomore at Providence Day, asked if there were any aspects of the world that Professor Wiesel still had a negative view of. When I asked him this question, Wiesel responded almost softly, yet his voice was intense. "Of course," he said. "Darfur. Russia. Organized protests in

"Inscription of Hope" was made by Sarah Robins of Temple Beth El, whose brother Harold had been one of the twelve students who followed "In the Footsteps of Elie Wiesel" during his visit here in Charlotte.

Wiesel began his presentation with a discussion from the Book of Job. "God can be unfair and unjust. ... But God is not indifferent. ..."

He illustrated the indifference in human beings with a story of his return to Auschwitz. He met with a priest who lived in a house in the town. In Wiesel's memory, the camp was isolated, far from

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Benjamin Smolen (center), recipient of the Young Heroes of Hope Award, with his aunt, Sally Gehl, who traveled from Cleveland, and his mother, Wendy Smolen. Photo by Bobby Cochran courtesy ECHO Foundation.

about change in Charlotte, to eliminate indifference in this community. Charlotte was unique among communities he had visited in the past, he said, we appeared to have the capacity to make major changes in our community and the world.

And so the Echo Foundation was born, a monumental effort of both Ansaldo and Wiesel. Beginning in 2000, the Echo

The morning of March 27 saw him conducting an extensive question and answer period with more than 1,000 high school students in the auditorium at Myers Park High School. The atmosphere in the auditorium before he spoke was surprisingly calm and orderly. Dressed in their best for this special occasion, the students expressed a combination of quiet anticipation and tense expectation.