

Genocide survivor speaks of atrocities

ALLISON SEIFE

On February 13, Alain Rwabukamba, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, shared his story with an audience at the High School. Ms. Altman, the adviser for the Human Rights Club, is also the founder of the Foundation for the Advancement of International Studies, known as FAIS, and organized the event. FAIS reached out to Alain Rwabukamba and Ed Ballen, the executive director of Rwanda Education Assistance Project, known as REAP, and offered them the opportunity to present their stories and goals for Rwanda.

Rwabukamba was four years old when the genocide took place in Rwanda in 1994. Rwanda was made up of three tribes: the Hutus, the Tutsis, and the Twa. However, the Twa tribe is relatively small, and therefore the conflict in Rwanda centered on the Hutus and Tutsis. The Hutus wanted to exterminate the Tutsis. Rwabukamba's father was a Tutsi and his mother was a Hutu; however, children assume the tribal identity of their father. In Rwabukamba's presentation, he described to the audience the horrific images and stories of the Rwandan genocide. Although Rwabukamba was

only four years old when the genocide took place, these memories are the most vivid memories he has to this day. He hid in a hospital from the Hutus. He explained that there was blood all over the hospital floor and he saw his classmates dying all around him. The Hutus entered the hospital and selected victims. He saw a woman decapitated by a Hutu right in front of his eyes. Rwabukamba explained to the audience: "I was imagining how I was going to die. It was something I could not imagine, but somehow I survived." Junior DiAnna Brice, reflected upon hearing Rwabukamba's stories: "Hearing someone's story of experiencing death and violence at such a young age and not growing up with much, truly opened my eyes to the devastation that some people live with."

After the genocide, life in Rwanda was still nightmarish. The school Rwabukamba attended was filthy as it served as a refugee camp, and there were dead bodies in the bathrooms. Despite the conditions, he was able to learn English, even though his teacher could barely speak it. In 2006, Rwabukamba's brother asked him if he wanted to work with an American man, Ed Ballen,

who was helping out in an orphanage in Rwanda. Rwabukamba served as a translator for Ballen, and they quickly developed a relationship and "built a bridge between two cultures." Ballen and Rwabukamba worked with the children in the orphanage, who were mainly survivors of the genocide. Ballen stated that he probably bought about one thousand toys for the orphanage.

Rwabukamba, who was inspired by his experiences in the Rwandan genocide, and Ballen established a non-profit organization known as the Rwanda Education Assistance Project (REAP). They focused their attention on improving conditions in the Duha Complex School in Rwanda. The school faces many challenges, as there are seventy students in one classroom with one teacher and few supplies. Many children do not complete even their primary education, as many fail the national exam. Girls drop out because of unsanitary conditions, and boys drop out to work in the mines. While malnutrition and poverty are overwhelming post genocide conditions, Rwandan students are eager to learn and this has inspired the REAP project.

Ballen stated: "It is amazing how these peoples' human spirits were never destroyed despite the circumstances."

REAP's work focuses on improving infrastructure, community involvement, and education. REAP sponsors intensive teacher trainings led by experts in the field, and the foundation continues to support improving the school with new technology, nutritional programming and improving sanitary conditions. REAP's goal is to create the Duha Complex School as a model school for other schools in Rwanda. In 2009, REAP created nine new classrooms for the school. In 2010, they brought electricity to the school, and in 2011, REAP created a community center within the school to hold events and create an involved school environment.

REAP hopes that White Plains High School can become involved in helping with the foundation. Ms. Altman expressed that she would love to get the school involved but needs to think of a practical way to help out. Lauren Bettino, senior at White Plains High School, was touched by Alain's story and expressed: "Alain has an incredibly powerful story that everyone can

learn from. He came from having nothing to finding the light in even his darkest times and turned his life around. His story really reminded me that we should always help those who are less fortunate than we are and that anything is possible." Alain is now living with his "American father," Ballen, in Katonah, New York. He is currently a senior at Manhattanville College and is majoring in engineering. Ballen and Rwabukamba are improving the lives of many people, as education is so valuable to the future of Rwandan citizens. Ballen views his involvement with post genocide Rwanda as a personal opportunity to make a difference in the world, and he shared this philosophy with the audience at White Plains High School when he stated: "In life, sometimes you have these moments that come upon you and you either take advantage of them or you don't." Clearly, Ed Ballen's personal moment was when he saw the great need to improve the conditions of children in post-genocide Rwanda, and his actions have made a difference in many lives.



Rwandan genocide survivor and his mentor share experiences with high school students
ALLISON SEIFE

February Break

EVAN RINGEL

One of the biggest issues of the 2011-2012 school year has been the controversy surrounding the decision by the school district to eliminate February break. This move has been met with mixed emotions from staff, students, and parents. The reason for this action was the abnormally high number of snow days last year, and the motivation behind the altered schedule was to avoid a situation similar to last year's, when days were taken off of spring break to make up for the missed days of school.

Despite this, it has be-

come clear to many that last year's snowfall was an abnormality, and not the norm. According to Ms. Diana Knight, the "general feeling is that we hope that the February Break will be reinstated next year." Particularly perturbing to many students, including junior Jarianna Rodriguez, is the fact that other districts, which had around the same amount of snow last winter, are having mid-winter recess this year. Ms. Knight also said that many staff members are worried about the cost of extra childcare during a week in which they were accustomed

to being off. Additionally, there is concern that students will treat the "break" this year like last year's mid-winter break and just decide not to attend school.

To the great relief of many students, Ms. Knight has said that, "if no snow days are used, extra time may be added to the spring vacation in April and the Memorial Day holiday." This is an acceptable compromise to many students, including senior Sam Pisani, who feels that, because the weather will be nicer during April and May, students will be able to take

better advantage of the time off. However, Rodriguez feels that the compensation isn't adequate because "everyone is used to going somewhere for vacation" in February, and there is not enough time to do that during the giveback days.

In conversations with students, many feel that, as junior Mike Troise said, "it was a poor choice to remove [February break]" and that it should be reinstated next year. While the students interviewed plan to attend school during this time, the attendance factor will be a big issue in whether or not we will have the break

in the future. Perhaps a bigger question to be answered will be how the removal of the break will affect the learning environment. Junior Daniel Grafman, thinking broadly, feels that this won't affect the learning environment much. Conversely, Rodriguez feels that the students will be "too lazy to work," because they will feel that they should be on break. In the long run, Grafman sums up the opinions of many very well, saying "I'm sure we all agree that February break is certainly nice to have."