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Jul 26, 2007 9:19 | Updated Jul 26, 2007 9:19

'Saving' Darfur

By **DAVID DAGAN**
HARRISBURG, Pennsylvania

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I made the drive from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to Washington in the spring of 2006 to attend a massive protest against the genocide in Darfur. One of the most memorable points I took away from the event came from Sen. Barack Obama, now a presidential contender.

Politics is frequently about navigating moral ambiguity, he told the sun-baked crowd. "Today is not one of those times. Today we know what is right and what is wrong."



Calling all campuses. Ginny Mitchell, of the Michigan Darfur Coalition, sits for a picture at Eastern Michigan University.
Photo: AP

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A broad movement has developed here since 2003 to stop the violence in Darfur. The effort is led by the Jewish community, but it reaches across religious lines. The Washington rally, attended by as many as 15,000, was a testament to the movement's scope.

"People are finding creative ways to get people involved [and to] feel empowered to speak out," says Benjamin Plener, a law student at Yale working on a project to collect and broadcast video appeals on Darfur from people around the world.

Jonah Burke spent three years working at Microsoft in Seattle after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania. Then he left the company and began looking for something new to do with his life. He learned about Darfur from his father and decided to use his computer background to help.

There were already plenty of Web sites that explained the conflict. Burke, 27, wanted to find a way to grab people emotionally. He came up with www.darfurwall.org. The site opens with an image of a wall made of 10 gray squares. Click on a square, and you will see a column of 40,000 numbers. Each represents one person killed in Darfur.

Most of the numbers are gray, but some are white. Burke highlights a number for every dollar that visitors to the site donate to his Darfur charity. "It's a way of expressing that every life is important," Burke says.

He has raised almost \$70,000 since launching the Darfur Wall in November. The donors come from 30 countries, including Israel. One woman, Julia Wight of Seattle, asked Burke to highlight three numbers to represent three family members who died in the Holocaust. He lit up their birth years - 1863, 1893 and 1896. Click on those years, and you'll see their names: Ida Kohnová, Hugo Kauder and Irena Kauderová.

"It was more than just giving her money," Burke says. "She also wanted to honor her

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family."

Ashok Gadgil, an environmental physicist at the US government's Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California, has worked on many projects in the developing world. He raised funds to go to Darfur and study how refugees in the crowded camps there use firewood. Having never worked in a war-torn region like Darfur before, he never saw anything like what he saw there.

"Mindboggling. It was horrific," Gadgil says. "The conditions are truly indescribable."

Firewood is a crucial issue: Refugees must leave the camps to collect it. On those trips, they face attack and rape by the Janjweed militias carrying out the genocide.

Gadgil leads a team that has designed a fuel-efficient stove that burns one-quarter of the firewood refugees now use. His team is now looking for ways to mass-produce the stoves and distribute them in Darfur.

Gadgil is leading the project on top of his regular job. It's impossible not to act, he says, if you witness such suffering and know there is a solution in your mind. "It's morally compelling that you try to apply the solution."

'NEVER AGAIN'

Jeremy Davidson recently watered trees in his St. Louis neighborhood to help refugees in Darfur. At \$10 an hour, the job was hardly a fund-raising bonanza. But Davidson, 21, a student at the University of Michigan who is home for the summer, is doing more than spraying water. He's spreading the word. Together with another student, he is the founder of Will Work for Food, a campus organization that does both fund-raising and political advocacy for Darfur.

"I'd rather work for an hour and try to raise money... rather than just, you know, dropping a check," Davidson says.

The group's other core principle is that both emergency aid and political advocacy are needed. One or the other is not enough.

Will Work for Food hand-delivered 300 letters appealing for more action in Darfur to Michigan Sen. [Carl Levin](#) when he visited the campus this spring. Davidson says reading about previous genocides and watching the movie Hotel Rwanda made a big impression on him.

"We keep saying, 'Never again,' to genocide, and then it happens and people just don't do anything," he says. "I took it on as my responsibility. Every human being - I think we all have a responsibility to do something about it."

When New Jersey teenager Arielle Wisotsky visited the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington in 2005, she was shocked by an exhibit on Darfur. "At the time, I didn't know where Darfur was and was unaware of the systematic death and destruction occurring there on a daily basis," the 18-year-old wrote in an e-mail. "If I, the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor, didn't know about Darfur, what did the rest of the world know?"

Wisotsky asked two longtime friends, brothers David and Eric Messinger, to help her take action. The trio founded Help Darfur Now, a high-school-based advocacy and fund-raising group. Their original goal was to raise \$1,000 from family and friends. Students and adults responded enthusiastically, newspapers began to pay attention and the project grew. So far, Help Darfur Now has raised \$300,000 and founded satellite chapters at 200 schools around the country.

Wisotsky used to be shy and reluctant to speak in public, says her mother, Nina Schwartz. Not any more. Last year, Wisotsky and Eric Messinger joined Obama, Elie Wiesel and other luminaries as speakers at the Washington rally for Darfur. Wisotsky now speaks easily to crowds, her mother says. "It was amazing to see the transformation that she underwent," she says.

Benjamin Plener was 12 years old when genocide happened in [Rwanda](#). Years later, he began reading about that crime and others that preceded it. "And I thought, what would I do?" Now he knows.

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'Saving' Darfur

By **DAVID DAGAN**
HARRISBURG, Pennsylvania

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He is among the leaders of 24 Hours for Darfur, a project to broadcast individual appeals for action on Darfur outside the [United Nations](#) this September. The project is inspired by the on-line video site YouTube.

Plener and other students at Yale Law School have worked on other aspects of Darfur advocacy, but they wanted to do something more direct and participatory. Anybody can upload an appeal to the group's Web site, www.24hoursfordarfur.org, and expect to be on a big screen this fall.



Calling all campuses. Ginny Mitchell, of the Michigan Darfur Coalition, sits for a picture at Eastern Michigan University.
Photo: AP

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The group hopes to gather appeals from around the world, partly to emphasize that a solution in Darfur must be international.

JEWISH LEADERSHIP

Jewish organizations have also been at the forefront of the movement for Darfur.

"The response from the entire American Jewish community on Darfur has been spectacular," says Ruth Messinger, president of American Jewish World Service (AJWS), a New York-based organization which provides development and humanitarian assistance. Messinger is one of the leaders of the Save Darfur Coalition, the nation's biggest umbrella organization for Darfur efforts.

The Jewish response was so strong because Darfur was quickly defined as a genocide, she says. Groups that have been victims of genocide know the dangers of silence, she says.

But the Darfur movement is equally notable for its religious breadth. The Save Darfur Coalition includes groups representing Muslims, Catholics and Evangelical Protestants, for example.

Even as they push the Darfur effort, activists see themselves building an infrastructure for future crises.

One of the leading groups in the movement, for example, is called the Genocide Intervention Network. The Washington-based organization was founded in 2004 and defines its mission as providing "individuals and communities with the tools to prevent and stop genocide." It wants to serve as a long-term presence, like the interest groups on both

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sides of the abortion and gun debates, says Daniel Millenson, one of its leaders. "There needs to be a way to quickly activate people and not have to build an organization like Save Darfur from scratch every time," he says.

The movement has had time to grow in sophistication as the violence in Darfur drags into its fifth year. A divestment campaign has seen scores of universities and 19 state pension funds drop investments tied to Sudan. The Genocide Intervention Network has been key in that campaign.

The broader Save Darfur organization also has begun pushing for divestment. Activists are now targeting China, a key trading partner and advocate for Sudan at the UN, by declaring the Beijing Olympic Games the "Genocide [Olympics](#)."

"The analysis and the acts have become increasingly sophisticated," Messinger says.

It has not all been smooth sailing. The [New York Times](#) reported earlier this year that humanitarian groups operating in Darfur objected to advertisements aired by Save Darfur in the US, arguing the broadcasts endanger the aid work. Messinger says the disagreement reflects tensions that arise regularly between advocacy and aid groups in conflict situations. The Darfur movement has been criticized for oversimplifying the conflict. Ethnicity in Darfur is complicated. Rebel groups purporting to represent the victims have splintered and have been accused of obstructing humanitarian efforts.

Messinger says activists understand these factors all too well. "I think it's an absurd critique," she says. "That cannot be used to obscure the fundamental act... The government is still destroying its own population."

Messinger says AJWS has made plans to offer financial support to groups working with the refugees and to call on President George W. Bush to press for an international solution for Darfuri refugees.

The conflict in Darfur continues, but Messinger says the activists can claim major achievements. The Jewish community is mobilized and recognizes that the international community still lacks a mechanism to intervene early enough to prevent genocide, she says.

Media coverage and government actions in the US have also become more substantial, she says, adding that the divestment and China campaigns are proving to be effective levers. Darfur, Messinger says, is moving up the American and international agenda. Don't expect activists like Davidson to ease up, though. "Every day you feel like we could be doing more," he says.

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15. #14 ACT is the key

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13. No one cared when Arabs killed all the Christians in South Sudan

Efox - United States (07/28/2007 23:56)

12. Darfur Liberals

Beryl Sholam Tzvi - Pittsburgh PA US of A (07/28/2007 16:24)

11. Want the return of U.S. military draft?

MARK KLEIN, M.D. - USA (07/28/2007 16:05)

10. A little background

Bob - USA (07/28/2007 14:54)

9. dafur

JL - (07/28/2007 14:15)

8. I vote "right."

JewishHeart - (07/28/2007 14:05)

7. Ken- I disagree #2

JewishHeart - (07/28/2007 14:04)

6. Ken- I disagree #1

JewishHeart - (07/28/2007 14:01)

5. Ronda- Do you hear yourself?

JewishHeart - (07/28/2007 13:53)