

2006-06-16

Jewish World Watch Eyes National Stage

by Tom Tugend, Contributing Editor

Reprinted with permission from The Jewish Journal



Inspecting a solar cooker at Valley Beth Shalom are Calabasas High School students Sophia Armen, left, and Samantha Finkelstein with Darfur native Suad Mansour and JWW's Janice Kamenir-Reznik

Janice Kamenir-Reznik wasn't sure where Darfur was on the map when she heard a Rosh Hashanah sermon at Valley Beth Shalom some 18 months ago.

During his sermon, Rabbi Harold Schulweis told the congregation that "Never Again" applies not only to the Holocaust but requires Jews to speak out and act against genocides anywhere, especially in Darfur, and urged formation of a new organization, Jewish World Watch.

Characteristically, Schulweis immediately followed preaching with action and asked Kamenir-Reznik to serve in a volunteer capacity as co-founder, president and CEO of the nascent organization.

The 54-year-old Encino lawyer, mother of three and veteran problem solver, has since learned much about Darfur, and she has shared her knowledge to help mobilize a vital segment of the Jewish community, especially young students, to transform awareness into tikkun olam, or repairing the world.

As of now, the 3-year-old Darfur genocide is no longer unknown, but its horrors continue. Currently spreading from the Sudan to neighboring Chad, it has claimed 400,000 civilian dead and 4 million refugees, accompanied by mass rapes of women and starvation among children.

The problems are staggering, but adopting the biblical injunction, "Do Not Stand Idly

By," Jewish World Watch has mobilized synagogues and schools, launched an effective divestment from Sudan campaign, and is now starting to ship solar cookers to a refugee camp.

The solar cooker concept is an elegantly simple response to a terrifying fact of life facing 20,000 people, almost all women and young girls, in the Iridimi refugee camp in eastern Chad.

While foraging for scarce firewood for basic cooking and water purification, the women and girls are at constant risk of gang rapes by roving bands of Arab militiamen. However, these dangerous excursions and the resultant atrocities can be circumvented through the use of simple, inexpensive sun-powered cookers made of cardboard and aluminum foil — donated by Jewish World Watch — that can be easily assembled by the refugees.

The cookers have proven their worth in other African countries, and Jewish World Watch, spearheading the Coalition to End Gang Rape in Darfur, aims to send 6,000 of the devices to families in the Iridimi camp.

Another front in Jewish World Watch's three-pronged campaign of education, advocacy and financial support is to persuade public institutions to divest themselves of holdings in recalcitrant companies doing business with the Sudanese government.

Kamenir-Resnik, addressing the University of California regents before they approved such a divestment, said that in general the Jewish community opposed such a tactic, because of its misuse against Israel.

But in order to counter the Darfur genocide, she said, "The divestment tool is not only morally appropriate, but is, indeed, a moral imperative."

Among the most persuasive advocates of this cause was a four-person delegation of 12-year olds from the Temple Israel of Hollywood Day School, who testified last week before the Los Angeles City Council.

Their appearance was the culmination of a year-long project, inspired by Jewish World Watch, in which 16 sixth-graders studied the issues and raised nearly \$900 through bake sales, washing cars and sale of green Jewish World Watch wristbands at a Purim carnival, said Orley Denman, their teacher.

Natan Reches, one of the four student reps, described his participation as "a life-changing experience," and the L.A. City Council followed through by voting unanimously to divest funds held by the state employee and teacher retirement systems.

By now, 43 Los Angeles-area synagogues, ranging from Reconstructionist to Orthodox, and with a combined membership of nearly 200,000, are members of Jewish World Watch, with Temple Israel's Rachel Andres as a main sparkplug. They have raised \$500,000, mostly in small denominations, of which the bulk has gone toward the building of two medical clinics and construction of water wells.

Recently the local American Jewish Committee chapter, ignoring organizational turf,

collected \$7,500 at a luncheon for the Jewish World Watch effort.

Education was the first emphasis of the Jewish World Watch founders and remains a top priority. Some 50 volunteer speakers have fanned out to high schools, summer camps and synagogues, with impressive results.

For instance, at Calabasas High School, the Armenian Club raised more than \$2,000 by selling self-designed T-shirts, and senior Samantha Finkelstein has spread the word by talking to large assemblies at 10 other high schools.

Although now focusing on Darfur, Jewish World Watch holds to its original mission statement: "To combat genocide and other egregious violations of human rights around the world."

Jewish World Watch is now hiring its first executive director and is evaluating future directions: Whether to expand from its Los Angeles base and go nationwide, and whether to address itself to other genocides and human rights violations, without neglecting its Darfur mission.

Amid considerable acclaim for Jewish World Watch's work, there have been some critical questions. Some come from "insular Jews," as Kamenir-Reznik calls them, who ask why they should give to non-Jewish causes, and, in any case, "nobody helped us during the Holocaust."

Since the main perpetrators in Darfur are Arab Muslims killing black African Muslims, some skeptics wonder whether there might be a political, pro-Israel subtext to Jewish World Watch's concern, and whether the black survivors will be subsequently "grateful" for Jewish help.

Perhaps the best answer is given by Schulweis, who told a recent press conference about Jewish World Watch's work: "I've been a rabbi for 50 years and have never seen such a response, especially among young students," he said. "Some people say about the Darfur genocide that it's an internal matter, that reports have been exaggerated. These are the same excuses we heard during the Holocaust.

"There is always an alternative to passive complicity. If we now turn aside, that would be our deepest humiliation," he said.

For more information, call (818) 501-1836, e-mail info@jewishworldwatch.org, or visit www.jewishworldwatch.org.