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Pupils want 400,000 paper dolls to spotlight Darfur

They're just paper dolls, cut from a hand-drawn pattern, faces drawn in Magic Marker.

But to pupils at one U.S. middle school, they signify the suffering of thousands on the other side of the world in Sudan.

"We were shocked and disturbed to hear about the genocide in Darfur because most of us didn't know what was going on," said Elizabeth Kapnick, an eighth-grader at Elm Place School in Highland Park, Ill. "We wanted to make something that would touch people. ... I figured paper dolls created by children just like the ones in Darfur."

The pupils started cutting and decorating the dolls in spring and soon were giving the patterns to friends and family members.

They now have about 4,000 dolls. Their goal: 400,000 dolls, one for each person who has died in Darfur in the last three years, according to some estimates.

The project began last school year in Cheryl Levi's seventh-grade world cultures class.

Levi teaches a unit on the Holocaust every year, and in that context she discusses contemporary humanitarian crises.

Last school year, the class discussion focused on Darfur. Levi showed videos of actor George Clooney and NBC correspondent Ann Curry visiting the region, and speakers came to the class to lecture on the dire situation there.

Darfur, a region in western Sudan, has been plagued by intertribal disputes over resources such as pastureland and water. In 2003 violence erupted between Sudanese government forces and rebel militias, who accused the government of neglect and discrimination.

In response, the government in Khartoum is alleged to have sent raiding parties to suppress dissent.

Estimates put the death toll between 200,000 and 400,000. An estimated 2 million are living as refugees after fleeing their homes.

When the segment was done, Levi's pupils wanted to learn more. Beyond that, they wanted to do more.

"One student said to me, 'Ms. Levi, we can't be done. We have to do something,'" the teacher recalled. "I said, 'Well, if you come up with an idea, we'll do it.'"

Elizabeth and her classmates put their heads together. They had heard of a project started in 1998 by a Tennessee middle-school class, which set out to collect 11 million paper clips to memorialize the victims of the Holocaust. They eventually collected about 30 million.

The Highland Park pupils settled on paper dolls and dubbed their effort Reach for Change. Pupils started distributing the patterns by e-mail and by hand to friends and relatives, asking them to cut out the dolls, decorate them and send them to the school.

Over the summer, one pupil brought the dolls to summer camp. At a recent meeting, about three dozen pupils gathered in Levi's classroom to toss around ideas. Publicize the effort at the local bank, one said. Take patterns to the doctor's or dentist's office. Take them to nursing homes.

The pupils hope to have 400,000 dolls by their graduation next June and to present them to Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., who has spoken out against the deteriorating situation in Darfur. With about 4,000 stacked in boxes and bins around the classroom and 396,000 to go, the students need to collect about 49,500 dolls per month to reach their goal.

They know it's a tall order, but they also know why it's important.

"What we were thinking was that it was really hard for us to connect with something so far away," said Keren Reichler, 13. "It's hard for people to connect with it, but we're trying to help people with that."

Ada Terman, also 13, said, "An important part of this project is to spread awareness about what's going on, not only to show that people are dying, but to inform people of how they can help."

At the end of another after-school brainstorming session recently, Levi, a teacher for nearly 40 years, beamed about her pupils' efforts. The true goal is not getting 400,000 dolls, she said; it's getting pupils to take it upon themselves to help their community and make a change in the world.

"I'm a teacher who likes to get kids involved in community service, in things where they give back, because we're so lucky to have so much," she said. Collecting all the dolls "would be icing on the cake, but the experience and the journey are the important things."

To learn more, visit: www.nssd112.org/elmp/teachers/Levi/Levi.htm.
