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BBYO genocide program puts focus on Darfur

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TORONTO – Sixteen-year-old Maya Feldberg was not at a party on Saturday, Jan. 31. She wasn't at a movie, a friend's house or a restaurant, either. Instead, she spent the night learning about genocide.

That Saturday, the B'nai Brith Youth Organization (BBYO) held a 12-hour Genocide Aware-a-thon.

The participants, a group of 30 to 40 teenagers, learned about the genocide in Darfur, Sudan, where at least 400,000 people have been killed since February 2003. Through guest speakers, discussions and activities, the teenagers learned the history and significance of the conflict.

"It's good – we're getting a lot of knowledge in a short period of time," said Feldberg, who joined BBYO two months ago. "You can look at it from different points of view and discuss different points of view."

Along with raising awareness, the Genocide Aware-a-thon raised more than \$1,400 for the Jewish World Watch's solar cooker project. The Jewish World Watch, an organization that helps raise awareness of and combats human rights violations, provides solar cookers for women in refugee camps. Each \$30 donation provides one cooker. Without a cooker, women are often sent out to collect firewood, a task that can take one hour to one full day to complete. While looking for firewood, many women are raped and beaten by enemy militias.

When 17-year-old Sarah Katz, the organizer of the event and BBYO's Lake Ontario regional vice-president, first heard about the genocide in Darfur, it hit close to home.

"It has to do with the fact that my grandparents are Holocaust survivors," she said.

Katz, learned about the genocide in her high school civics class and participated in a Darfur rally.

"I just kept picturing my grandparents being in these situations. It was very heart-wrenching. I started researching, reading about it. It got me emotional, that turned into fuel to be proactive."

When planning the event, Katz first wanted to recreate a refugee camp, but eventually decided on an aware-a-thon.

"The whole program is meant to get people more aware... of themselves and other human beings around them and to see how we're inter-related,"



From left are Michelle Covant, Orly Taub, Stacey Ramelson, Sarah Anderson and Kelly Indarjit at the Art for Darfur workshop. Their artwork is a response to their participation in BBYO's Genocide Aware-a-thon.

she said.

The first speaker of the night was Debbie Bodkin, a sergeant with the Waterloo Regional Police Service. Bodkin told the teenagers about her experience as a fact-finding volunteer for the United States and the United Nations in Darfur.

While in Darfur, Bodkin spent her days interviewing refugees. Their experiences were different, but their stories rarely changed. Many refugees spoke about being bombarded in their villages, first by government planes and trucks, and then by the Sudanese-supported Janjaweed militia. The militia would often beat and rape the women in the village and kill the remaining men.

"The youngest was seven, the oldest was 60 – both were gang raped," Bodkin told the teenagers.

"The overwhelming thing was the strength of the people," she said, adding that, before they told their stories, the women would often offer Bodkin food and water, both of which were in short supply.

For Ismail Adam, the second speaker of the night, the aware-a-thon demonstrates the power of charity.

Adam is the president of the Darfur Association of Canada, a non-profit organization that raises awareness about the genocide in Darfur, and has been to several similar events.

"Just to learn to give – it's a powerful thing to do. People who learn early in life the value of giving will be leaders of the world," he said.