



Students Video Conference with Teens from Darfur

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Valerie Kiebala (center) is joined by **Grace Donnelly** (left), the Rev. Corey Brost, C.S.V. and **Libby Donnelly** for an early morning video chat with teens from Darfur.

Saint Viator students helped to pilot a groundbreaking tool in the international effort to raise awareness about the genocide in Darfur: they held a video conference with Darfuri teens.

“I never imagined that this could happen, that we could talk to them, live,” said senior Valerie Kiebala of Rolling Meadows. “They’re in Africa!”

Kiebala and her classmates are members of STAND, or Students Taking Action Now for Darfur. They demonstrate monthly to educate the community of the atrocities going on in Sudan, and they continue to fundraise for Darfuri students living in refugee camps in southeastern Chad.

Last week, the Saint Viator students were contacted by officials with the Enough Project in Washington, DC, and specifically their Sister Schools Program, whose mission is to connect American schools with Darfuri students in refugee camps.

As part of their effort to promote peace and advocate for its victims, they are harnessing the power of video and the Internet to bring together American students with those from Darfur.

“The beauty of the Sister Schools Program concept is that it creates a mutually beneficial relationship in which students learn from each other and expand their horizons,” says Gabriel Stauring, co-founder and director of i-ACT, an advocacy organization working in Chad to set up video conferencing technology in its classrooms.

“Schools in the U.S. engage in creative fundraising efforts to support their sister schools in the camps,” he adds. “But the program also allows students and communities halfway across the world to connect with the refugees at a very personal level, sharing information about their daily lives and becoming friends.”

Saint Viator students eagerly accepted the challenge. They arrived one hour before school for the teleconference, while it was about 2 p.m. for their Darfuri counterparts.

“We tried to keep it upbeat, so we didn’t talk about their living conditions or their homes. But we discovered we had so many similarities,” Kiebala said. “They are studying English in school, and they have a big focus on math and science, like we do.”

Even more, the Darfuri teens said that when they’re not studying, they like to play soccer and that they like to dance. One 17-year old boy even got up to demonstrate some of his moves, and it served to break up everyone on both sides of the camera.

Stauring reports that as a result of fundraising efforts from American students like those at Saint Viator, schools in the refugee camps are starting to be constructed.

“Two of the schools in (Chad) have new classrooms made of concrete blocks with concrete floors and doors and windows that actually lock,” he says. “There are blackboards on the walls and desks are arriving soon, while much-needed teacher training and textbook purchases have taken place.”

More is being planned, with construction underway to complete more classrooms, Stauring says.

Saint Viator students already know they would like to have more video conferences, and with advancing technology, they will be able to stay in touch with their Darfuri friends through a form of social media created by Enough officials.

“We only talked to them for about 15 minutes, but it was powerful,” Kiebala adds. “Now, we know who we’re working for, and we’re more inspired than ever.”