

Hiroshima A-bomb survivor addresses student group

When 76-year-old Shigeko Sasamori stood up before a group of students and administrators in the Cooke Auditorium last October, she telling began a true story of blue skies, an airplane dropping something white from the sky, a strong force, a screaming baby, death, darkness and burning skin. It is a story she has told hundreds of times, all over the country, for almost six decades. And as often happens, the audience reacted with pained silence, audible sighs of horror and tear-streaked faces.

Of waking up on the street after the atomic bomb was dropped on her city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, she said: "If there is a hell, probably that was hell."

Shigeko Sasamori's story of human suffering was the focus of the first meeting of the academic year of the Genocide Awareness and Prevention Club (GAAP). In keeping with the club's theme of human rights violations, Ms. Sasamori, still scarred from the radiation burns she suffered, urged the audience to make sure the world never repeats the mistakes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She is part of a group seeking an end to war and a definitive timetable for nuclear disarmament.

"Our mission is to educate the NYMC community about both past and present actions against the human community, how this influences current events, and what can be done to stop human rights violations," said GAAP president and second-year medical student Julie Rice. "In that spirit, we hosted this organization, the Hiroshima Peace Initiative. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki represents one of the greatest human rights violations in the last century. With Shigeko Sasamori, a Hiroshima survivor, as witness, we felt students could have the opportunity to connect with the tragedy on the human level."

Ms. Sasamori was 13 years old the day the bomb was dropped, and is one of the few survivors to have been outside and within a mile of ground zero. She recalled seeing the plane as it approached and was remarking to a friend how beautiful the blue sky was when she felt the force of the nuclear explosion. Her friend did not survive.

Ms. Sasamori was one of a group of 25 young Japanese women, known as the Hiroshima Maidens, who were seriously disfigured by keloid scars and deformed hands caused by the A-bomb. The Hiroshima Maidens were brought to the United States in 1955 to undergo multiple reconstructive surgeries. She is now an ambassador for the Hiroshima Peace Initiative, which advocates nuclear disarmament around the world.

"I think her talk was moving and powerful, and fitting for our institution," said GAAP treasurer, third-year medical student and Ph.D. candidate Mike Kharazian. "I hope it encourages our students to be aware of what is going on in the world. From a medical perspective, her story



Hiroshima survivor Shigeko Sasamori, front row right, and Steven L. Leeper, front row left, chairperson of the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation, were welcomed to campus by members of the Genocide Awareness and Prevention Club. Back row from left: Padmini Murthy, M.D., M.P.H., M.S., faculty advisor; M.D./ Ph.D. candidate Mike Kharazian, treasurer; and second-year medical students Jordan Chanler-Berat, secretary, Jennifer Sevush, secretary, and Julie Rice, president.

reminded us not to lose touch with the humanistic side of disease."

GAAP was originally created to educate and inform the College community and its neighbors about the background and current situation in the ongoing genocide in Darfur, Sudan. This mission was in direct response to the lack of news coverage of the atrocities being committed against civilians of Darfur, said Ms. Rice.

Last year GAAP hosted a speaker from the International Rescue Committee, and held several informative events about the genocide in Darfur, raising money through the DAFUR FAST campaign for relief efforts and holding informal lunchtime meetings for students interested in discussing current events in relation to genocide and human rights violations.

This year GAAP is diversifying its message to include the genocide in Darfur in the greater context of human rights violations around the globe.

Ms. Sasamori was joined by Steven L. Leeper, chairperson of the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation.

"Mr. Leeper really brought home the importance of Hiroshima in the global debate on nuclear proliferation and world peace," said GAAP faculty advisor, Padmini Murthy, M.D., M.P.H., M.S., assistant professor of health policy and management and director of the global health program at the School of Public Health. "He gave students a current perspective on the politics surrounding nuclear weapons and suggested activism to prevent an event like Hiroshima from occurring again."

By the end of 1945, about 140,000 people had died in Hiroshima from the effects of radiation poisoning, which prevents new cells from forming and, in its most acute form, causes the entire body to break down. In his introductory remarks, Robert W. Amler, M.D., dean of the School of Public Health observed that "War is the antithesis of public health."

Mr. Leeper called nuclear weapons "completely illegal," and added, "Of all human problems, this is the easiest one to fix, and the one we need to solve right now."

Francesca Farinacci, an M.P.H. student in the School of Public Health, said that the issues discussed by Ms. Sasamori and Mr. Leeper are ones everyone should be concerned with. "Whenever you can associate a personal experience to a very political issue, it tugs at your heart," she said.

First-year medical student Afoma Ndubulsi said it was the first time she had come in contact with a victim of the atomic bomb. "It's a shame, and what really struck me is that, here we are learning to prevent the internal causes of disease and years later these people are still suffering with diseases caused by that single act," Ms. Ndubulsi said.

Ms. Sasamori has had many surgeries to remove cancer from her intestines. She also suffers a lesion on her thyroid, which is common among survivors because the thyroid is very sensitive to radiation.

"Especially after I had my son, I realized I had a mission," said Ms. Sasamori. "Because I survived this, I must tell people all over the world that what happened in Hiroshima should never happen again. No more Hiroshima." ▲