

Genocide survivor: 'Hold onto hope'

By CHARLES MENCHACA
WAUSAU DAILY HERALD
CMENCHAC@WDMPRINT.COM

Students and residents will get a firsthand account this week of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the hope of one of its survivors.

Central Wisconsin residents are invited to hear Immaculée Ilibagiza speak at Wausau East High School on Tuesday. Nearly 1,800 students from 19 schools will fill the school's auditorium to near capacity on Wednesday — twice.

Ilibagiza will tell the story of how she and seven other women huddled silently in a hidden bathroom for 91 days while family members, neighbors, friends and other Rwandan citizens — nearly 1 million in all — were slaughtered throughout the country because they were ethnic Tutsis.

Ilibagiza, 38, spends most her time traveling around the world to share her story. She estimated that 200,000 people in 10 countries have heard her speak since she started two years ago. She also has told her story on CBS' "60 Minutes."

Besides informing people of the massacre, Ilibagiza wants to tell them to never give up.

"All of us hurt in one way or another," she said. "Hold onto hope, and hold onto God."

Ilibagiza did not consider herself a religious person before the genocide. While in hiding, though, she began to question God's existence.

Her father gave her a rosary before she hid, and she began to recite the rosary. Eventually, God started to answer her questions, and her faith grew during the experience, she said.

After the genocide, she forgave those who killed the people in her life. Ilibagiza moved on and took a job with the United Nations. There, she even-

If you go

What: Presentation from Rwandan genocide survivor Immaculée Ilibagiza and a book signing.

When: 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Wausau East High School Auditorium, 2607 N. 18th St., Wausau

Cost: Free

To learn more: www.immaculee.com



Immaculée Ilibagiza

tually told her story to co-workers, who motivated her to share it with the world.

Edgar Elementary School teacher Colin Hanson was unaware the genocide occurred when he was a junior in high school. He learned more about the genocide when the movie "Hotel Rwanda" was released in 2004 and by reading Ilibagiza's book, "Left to Tell." Hanson helped raise money to bring Ilibagiza to Wausau.

The book also helps Ilibagiza tell her son and daughter about the Rwandan grandparents who were killed during the genocide.

Ilibagiza said audience members become emotional during her presentations, but they typically are grateful to have heard her message.

"It's exciting to know that this story can make a difference," she said.