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Kurdish activist tells students of threatened culture



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 (Contact)

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Kurdish activist Kani Xulam sat silently inside the Baylor School chapel with a sign that read "A Kurd" taped to his tie and gray bandages with red tape wrapped around his head.

He waited several minutes for about 650 upper school students to find their seats. After a brief introduction he slowly removed the bandages and sign as his audience watched in silence.

"Our culture is slated for extinction," he told the group after saying there are about 30 million Kurds around the world, the majority in Turkey.

"We are the indigenous people of the Middle East," he said as he stood in front of a podium covered with the red, white and green Kurdish flag.

Mr. Xulam, which means public servant in Kurdish, is the director of the American Kurdish Information Network, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., established to increase awareness about the Kurds.

"My personal hope is to see a free and independent Kurdistan," he said before his talk. "We have the dubious distinction of being the largest stateless people on the face of the earth."

That amazed Junnie Kwon.

"It's surprising that there are so many people in the world who are Kurdish and yet no one recognizes them as people, as a community," added the 16-year-old junior, who wants to start writing encouragement letters to Kurdish girls in Turkey.

Forest Manis said he had never before heard of the Kurds.

timesfreepress.com
 Chattanooga Times Free Press audio

Kani Xulam - Download MP3 -

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

* The nonprofit American Kurdish Information Network was founded in 1993 in Washington, D.C., to increase awareness about the Kurds.

* It seeks to provide commentary on the situation of the Kurds in Kurdistan, expose every form of human rights violation and repression against the Kurdish people and inform the public of political and cultural developments in Kurdistan.

Source: www.kurdistan.org

ESTIMATED KURDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

* Turkey: 14 million

* Iraq: 6 million

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"The first thing I thought was how millions of people can exist without us knowing about it," said the 17-year-old senior.

Mr. Xulam, who changed his name from his Turkish assigned name, Namet Gunduz, left Turkey when he was 19 and migrated with his family to the United States.

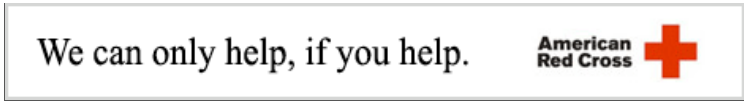
Asked about his upbringing in a country where speaking Kurdish was banned until 1991, he says his memories are not good.

"I remember being fearful of expressing myself," he said. "I remember, for example, in elementary school, kids, my classmates, peeing on themselves (from fear) if they hadn't done their homework."

Children spoke Kurdish at home, but when they started school they were expected to speak Turkish, he said.

At the end of his talk Mr. Xulam told the students he didn't share the story of the Kurds for them to be sad but to "make them a little bit angry so tomorrow when they are big, in positions of power, perhaps they will make this world a little more gentle for people whose voice has been muffled."

* Iran: 5 million
 * Syria: 1.5 million
 Source: Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook



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