

Holocaust survivor speaks to students

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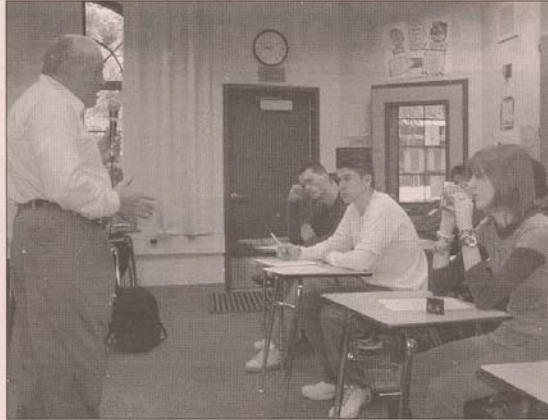
By the time World War II ended, George Heller was 80 pounds and could barely walk as a result of the inhumane conditions he suffered in a Budapest concentration camp. In spite of all he was put through, it was hope that gave him the strength to survive the war, he told a class of students at Sequoia High School Wednesday.

"Terrible things may happen, but they don't have to be the end," Heller said. "They can be the beginning of something wonderful."

The talk with Sequoia High School students was arranged by the Survivor Project, a Santa Rosa, Calif.-based organization that uses oral histories as a vehicle for teaching students about different cultures. Teachers are thinking of expanding the project's reach at Sequoia and Woodside High School has expressing interest in the program as well.

After the war, Heller found himself homeless but soon set sail for the United States, where he embarked on a career in software development after earning degrees at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1971, Heller was elected to the New York Academy of Sciences and in 1983 received MIT's George B. Morgan Award for his work with the MIT Educational Council.

His success was in great part a re-



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George Heller recounts his concentration camp days to students

sult of his positive attitude, he told students. When asked if he harbors any anger or hatred to the Nazi officers who inflicted a reign of terror on him and murdered his brother and sister, Heller said he tries not to hate anyone in his life.

"The worst thing you can do in life is hate," Heller said. "You can ruin your life by hating. Hating does terrible things to you, not to anybody else. Loving and caring are much better ways of having a happy life."

In 1990, Heller retired from IBM after a 30-year career in software development and currently teaches

desktop publishing at the Redwood City Senior Center.

"We have little control of the events around us, but we can control the way we react," Heller said. "You can make life beautiful for yourself by your own actions. It's up to you, it's up to you, it's up to you."

"This is much better than just reading out of a textbook," said Kelly Davis, a sophomore at Sequoia High School.

The Survivor Project talks, slated to wrap up this Friday, are seamlessly incorporated into the school's English and history curriculum. The

project ends when students present their own oral histories.

Jessica Mass, an English teacher at Sequoia, said that there is a perception that this sort of program is unnecessary for students who grow up in the diverse communities of the Bay Area.

"But people tend to clump together and don't know so much about each other," Mass said. "They need to get beyond their superficial differences and learn each others stories and histories."

The Survivor Project has gained more attention as the diversity issue moved to mainstream consciousness recent years, said Phyllis Rosenfield, executive director of the Survivor Project.

But demand for the project, which costs about \$10,000, is not high right now in area, where financially strapped schools cannot afford to consider what they see as "soft" programs that are not already incorporated into the curriculum.

The \$10,000 price tag covers teacher training, locating an interviewee, on-site coaching and support and the displaying of students' work throughout the county. In the past, schools were able to procure at least a small percentage of the funds.

"But that's not happening at all right now," Rosenfield said. "It's unfortunate because with the current political climate, the need has become greater than ever before."