

Roméo Dallaire believes in youth, humanity

By Francie Healy



Bishop George Bruce (centre) introduces Lori-Anne Jameson (right) and Brianna Shadforth to Roméo Dallaire. Photo by Francie Healy

Brianna and Justine Shadforth, 15 and 17 years old, sat with their grandfather, Bill Shadforth, at a remarkable dinner in Kingston last month.

It was Bishop George Bruce's annual fundraising event, where you probably wouldn't normally find young people like Brianna and Justine, let alone 22 others their age. The young people were there along with everyone else at the sold-out event to listen to Lieutenant-General, the Honourable Roméo Dallaire, who led the UN forces in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide.

But, unlike everyone else, the 24 young people's dinner tickets, at \$100 a plate, were donated by two men of the diocese. The men wished to remain anonymous. Bishop Bruce wanted the young people to be able to attend because of their increasing interest and commitment to social justice,

particularly in Africa.

Some of the youth had recently returned from Kenya; most were involved in raising money for Primate's World Relief and Development Fund (PWRDF) and the Stephen Lewis Foundation to help alleviate the problem of AIDS in Africa.

At Youth Synod last fall, they had watched the movie *Hotel Rwanda* with Mimi Kashira, a Kingston resident whose husband was killed in the Rwandan genocide. Some arrived at the event with Gen. Dallaire's book, *Shake Hands with the Devil*, tucked under their arms.

The young people sat at different tables and listened intently when Romeo Dallaire spoke. He directed many of his comments to them. He said his generation often thought of Canada as just a young country, and of Canadians as just the kids next door to the U.S.

But people of the new generation, he said, think of Canada as older than a kid. They see it as a young adult with maturity, ready to lead, ready to make an impact on human rights throughout the world.

He told a story about 26 contingents from several countries who went into a Rwandan village where the people had been massacred. Many were women and young girls who had been brutally raped and mutilated. Some were still alive when the troops arrived, but barely. Later, Gen. Dallaire asked each contingent commander what the troops were ordered to do: to go to the dying women and offer

whatever help they could, or, knowing the high rate of AIDS in the country, to move on rather than risking the possibility of contracting the disease. Almost all—23 commanders—said they ordered their troops to keep on going because it wasn't worth the risk to the men.

The question was moot with three of the others. Their troops just moved in, without rubber gloves, into the blood and devastation, to help the women or just to offer solace during these women's last moments. Those troops were from Holland, Ghana, and Canada.

"Why do we do that?" he asked. "What makes Canadians instinctively care and act?"

We do it, he said, because it's who we are. "It's against our natures to stay at home and let them rot in Darfur or Afghanistan," he added. He said he believed the world would change, and it

would be young people who would begin the transition. "Humanity seeks serenity," he said, "and not conflict, or power, or violence. One day we will no longer have conflict because of our differences. Of course, it will take about two centuries if we work at it, but ultimately I think we'll have success."

He said Canada has to act as the leading middle power it is and provide troops, intellect and cash to the UN, "rather than letting the big powers trip over each other and screw it up."

"You know," he said, "when 3,000 people died in the U.S., the world was mobilized. But 800,000 people died in Rwanda and nobody came."

He said Canada has to ask its youth: Where do you want this country to go? It has to utilize the energy, intellect and "great potential" of its young people.

In response to a question from a young man in the audience, Gen. Dallaire said Canada could help in Darfur by reinforcing the UN force with troops who will provide protection and move the refugees home. It can supply necessary equipment, diplomatic and humanitarian workers.

And he said Canadians had to work with the Americans. "There's no point in crapping all over them," he said. "But we can influence them to change, from the sidelines."

Afterwards, Beth Lorimer, one of the young people in the room, said she believed the youth felt inspired by Romeo Dallaire. "We're next," she said. "And the change has to come from us, from our activism."

She felt it would be her generation's job to begin by promoting awareness.

"It's important that we carry on the torch," she said.