

Soldier shares anti-hate message

By: JAMES MCGINNIS Bucks County Courier Times

MIDDLETOWN

Leon Bass served in a segregated, all-black battalion that helped liberate the Buchenwald concentration camp.

The same hatred and intolerance responsible for the Holocaust and institutional racism in America was at work when a gunman opened fire on Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and 19 others Saturday.

That was the message of Leon Bass, a World War II veteran who spoke to students at Newtown Friends School on Tuesday. Bass was part of a segregated, all-black U.S. Army battalion that helped liberate the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945.

A resident of the Pennswood Village retirement community in Middletown, Bass visited the neighboring school to lecture the students on the insidious nature of hate.

The retired school teacher and principal from Philadelphia offered an at times brutal account of the horrors he witnessed in Europe. He said hatred is similar to the rage focused on members of political parties in the United States today.

"People hate some people because they have never been loved," Bass told the students. "Some people hate because they need an excuse for their problems. The same thing happened when the congresswoman in Arizona was shot."

Giffords, a Democrat, was among 20 people allegedly shot by suspect Jared Lee Loughner. Six of them died. Giffords suffered brain injuries and was placed in a chemically induced coma.

Americans are angry and frustrated with the economy and the inability to find jobs, Bass said, comparing this to the period before World War II. That was a time of terrible atrocities in Germany, he told the students.

"In all the training they gave me, there was no mention of the concentration camps," he said. "I saw the walking dead - human beings that had been tortured and starved. They were skin and bones. They had skeletal faces and deep set eyes.

"I saw the clothing of little children piled against the wall," Bass continued. "There were huge piles of clothing that once belonged to children, but I never once saw a child. The piles of human bodies were 4-foot high.

"The odor that came from human death was overpowering," said Bass. "I saw jars of formaldehyde. There were jars where I could see eyes, fingers, hearts, livers, everything possible.

"I went to another barrack and I was told this was where they interrogated the prisoners," he continued. "I saw the blood on the cement floor. On the wall, some of the instruments of torture were still hanging.

"In one barrack was a man who was trying so desperately to look up at me, but he was so weak and so starved," Bass said. "He finally looked up at me. But he said nothing. Nor did I."

Bass said he volunteered for military service at age 18 and served with the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion until he was 21 years old. Returning to the United States, he experienced discrimination despite wearing his military uniform.

"I was told that I wasn't good enough to eat at a restaurant. I got on the bus and saw the sign 'Colored Must Be Seated At The Back.' But all the seats in the back were already taken," he said. "One time, I stood up for more than 100 miles in my uniform, staring at all these empty seats in the front [of the bus]."

Concerned by the serious nature of Bass' presentation, officials at Newtown Friends School restricted the presentation to students in sixth, seventh and eighth grades.

Eighth-grader Jake Malavsky of Yardley said the presentation was "upsetting but important to learn about so that it never happens again."

Sixth-grader Michael Silver of New Hope said he simply couldn't imagine being able to live a normal life after such experiences in World War II.

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Buchenwald Concentration Camp

It opened in 1937 in Germany as one of the first and largest of the Nazi prison camps.

At least 56,000 died there, according to official estimates.

Among its 250,000 prisoners were Jews, captured Soviet soldiers and others singled out for reasons such as being a criminal, disabled, homosexual or a priest.

It was primarily a work camp. Many died from starvation and harsh conditions. Some were subjected to medical experiments.

In May 1938, the Nazis established a daily ration of four buckets of water for each barrack of prisoners.

Buchenwald was the first camp liberated by American forces on April 4, 1945. A week later, Gens. Dwight D. Eisenhower and George S. Patton visited the camp to witness the atrocities.

Source: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

January 12, 2011