

## **Forum covers world of social justice topics**

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From genocide to bigotry, the 2009 Social Justice Regional Conference, being held today and tomorrow at the University of the Fraser Valley, aims to enlighten valley residents and create discussion.

District teacher associations from Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Langley and Surrey, along with the B.C. Teachers' Federation, are sponsoring the event.

Seminar topics include animal welfare, violence and sexual orientation.

Abbotsford District Teachers' Association president Rick Guenther said the BCTF sponsors regional conferences on a regular basis, but this is the first time it has been held in Abbotsford.

"Because social justice covers such a wide spectrum, the speakers, the topics will vary from year to year," said Guenther. "It will provide opportunities for people to think about the world around us."

Jean de Dieu Hakizimana, an Abbotsford resident and survivor of genocide in Rwanda, spoke about genocide at last year's conference and will present again this year.

He said the fight against genocide and any other social injustice should start at the community level.

"I believe social justice is a grass roots effort," Hakizimana said. "For me it's very important for the community to be inclusive."

The learning should start at a young age, he added, because children are able to process information well and should have the tools to form opinions.

"Young people are so advanced - I can't believe it," said the former board of education candidate. "Education should be open to everything so when people grow up they can decide what's important to them."

It may a challenge to bring new topics into the light of day, as there seems to be too much narrow-mindedness in Abbotsford, he said.

"You can not get voted in if you talk about social justice," said Hakizimana. "There's a long way to go."

While the Abbotsford board of education had a change of heart and decided recently to offer the Social Justice 12 in the city's high schools, starting this September, Guenther said the recent letters to the media about the class by Abbotsford residents have been a letdown for him.

"It's bigotry at its finest. It's very disappointing to see that," he said.

Guenther added individual schools are in the process of deciding whether they will offer the course based on student willingness and teacher availability.

Along with Hakizimana, conference presenters will include UFV professor Martha Dow and keynote speaker Alex Sanchez, who will talk about faith and sexuality.

The conference is open to everyone. Program information is online at [www.bctf.ca](http://www.bctf.ca).

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