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Behind the Scenes: Elie Wiesel

 MARCH 20, 2014 BY [MARY STANTON KNIGHT](#)

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Professor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel speaks with students of the University of Mississippi at a dinner in his honor Monday, Feb. 8, 2010 at The Lyceum. Professor Wiesel is on campus to deliver The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College Spring Convocation Lecture at the Gertrude C. Ford Center for the Performing Art. Photo by Nathan Latil, UIM Brand Photography

In a previous blog I talked about being able to interview Soledad O'Brien, and that reminded me of other interesting people I've met during my career at Ole Miss. In 2010, Holocaust survivor and humanitarian Elie Wiesel was the guest speaker for one of the Honors College's convocations. The idea of speaking to him made me speechless.

As a freshman or sophomore in college, I was assigned Wiesel's book, "Night", for an English assignment. It was 109 pages that impacted my life from that first reading and still resonates today. I remember staying up most of the night to finish it. It took most of the night partly because I am a slow reader, but also because it is a book that has to be put down for brief periods just so your mind can digest what you have read. It's about 15 year-old Wiesel's heartbreaking capture by Nazi soldiers, his time in a camp, surviving a death march and seeing his father beaten and being unable to protect him. Wiesel was the only member of his family to survive the Holocaust. He ended up in Paris and eventually wrote "Night" and two other books about his experience- "Day" and "Dawn." I bought the trilogy, having to know how he managed not just to survive but to live after experiencing the pain and torture that he did at such a young age.

Fast-forwarding to 2010 when I found myself standing in front of Mr. Wiesel, there were so many things I wanted to ask him, but still found myself tongue-tied. This man had been just an image in my mind. A scrawny 15 year-old trudging through snow with rags for clothes, now transformed into a small, astute man with gray hair and wise eyes. What questions could I ask him that hadn't already been asked? What words could I say of reverence that he hadn't already heard millions of times over? It was a powerful moment, and I can still remember the feel of his small hand in mind as I introduced myself. Of all the people I've had the opportunity to talk with, Elie Wiesel still stands out as the highlight. To be in the room with someone with such a fighting spirit, such determination to live and then to see that no other child has to endure another Holocaust was an experience beyond measure.

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