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## In the mist

June 3, 2015

*You should know... Zachary Kaufman*

**By Josh Marks**

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Photo provided

In his 36 years on the planet, Zachary D. Kaufman has accumulated a resume to rival even the most Type A Washingtonian—attorney, academic, political scientist, writer, speaker, social entrepreneur, Supreme Court fellow.

After attending [Shady Side Academy](#) in Pittsburgh, Kaufman earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Yale University, masters and doctoral degrees in international relations from Oxford University and a law degree from Yale Law School. Kaufman also is currently a visiting

fellow at both Yale Law School and the Yale University Genocide Studies Program.

He has published two books on genocide and atrocities. He is working on his third, scheduled to be published later this year by Oxford University Press, on legal and policy prescriptions for dealing with perpetrators of genocide and other mass atrocities.

He sat down with us to talk about facing anti-Semitism as a child in West Virginia, getting to know the silverback gorillas in East Africa's Virunga Mountains and making "never again" a reality.

### **What is the most exciting aspect of being a Supreme Court fellow? Have you met all of the Supremes?**

The most exciting aspect of my work is witnessing and contributing in a small way to history. Our country faces important, controversial, difficult questions of law and judicial administration, and it's been an honor and thrill to work here as we wrestle with many of those issues.

Yes, I have met each of the justices. One thing that has struck me is how different some of them are from the personas popularized in the media.

I have also been working with staff throughout the judicial branch, including in the various judicial agencies, particularly the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. As the judiciary is probably the least understood of the U.S. government's three co-equal branches, it's been fascinating to learn more about and participate in its operation.

### **How did you become interested in the Rwandan genocide of the Tutsis by Hutu extremists?**

My mother, Romaine, was born and grew up in South Africa, and told me stories about the region. So, I learned about sub-Saharan Africa from an early age.

I am Jewish and several of my relatives perished in the Holocaust. During my childhood, I learned a lot about the genocide against my own people.

Growing up as one of few Jews in Morgantown, W. Va., I was the target of several instances of anti-Semitism. Simply for being Jewish, some of my classmates spat on me and verbally and physically attacked me. On one occasion, a fellow student, who held me personally responsible for the death of Jesus Christ, picked me up, turned me over and repeatedly rammed my head into a rock until I bled. I was in the second grade.

On very few occasions did anyone, including teachers, intervene. In some instances, it was actually parents and religious leaders who taught these children how to feel and act toward Jews. It was because of these experiences that I learned early in life that innocents can sometimes suffer discrimination. This discrimination can be manifested violently. Many people, even those with the power to help or in positions of authority, will unfortunately remain bystanders or even initiate or exacerbate these problems. I learned at an early age that it is vital to combat myths, misinformation and misperceptions that lead to persecution.

### **How can we make the term "never again" a reality, or is that even possible?**

The post-Holocaust demand for "never again" has disappointed again and again. Claiming a lack of knowledge about atrocities is no longer credible, as global news and intelligence raise awareness that the Islamic State, Boko Haram and other groups are perpetrating such offenses today. Civilians are being targeted right now, right this second, in Burma, Burundi, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere around the world.

But there are steps we can take to make "never again" a reality. The Obama administration's rhetoric and infrastructure are promising, even if they haven't delivered all that we've hoped. For example, the Obama administration elevated atrocity prevention to "a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States" and created an "Atrocity Prevention Board" in the White House to coordinate interagency efforts to identify and respond to genocides and other atrocities. But political will is still sorely lacking in the U.S. government and throughout the international community to translate words, structure and capabilities into meaningful action.

### **What was it like being up close to silverback gorillas?**

I've been visiting the silverback gorillas in the Virunga Mountains (on the border of Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda) for the past 14 years. During a recent trip, a ranger said he could tell that one of the silverbacks, Guhonda, recognized me.

I've learned how to grunt different messages to the gorillas. Observing them is much like watching a human family. The babies play, the juveniles are mischievous and the adults keep a watchful eye over everything.

You can clearly see emotions in the gorillas' faces: excitement, concern, anger. Recently, Elizabeth (my wife) and I observed a mother gorilla trying to get her baby and herself across a ravine. She put the baby down and investigated the area for a while. The baby cried, presumably thinking it had been abandoned. The mother returned and the baby looked relieved. After scooping the baby up into her arms, they both crossed the ravine safely.

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