Savory aromas of pizza and popcorn filled the room where moviegoers gathered. The audience had not come to see an action film or an art flick. Instead, they came to learn about social justice.

On Jan. 30, “Rigoberta Menchú: Daughter of the Maya” was screened at the MSU Denver Student Success Building. That evening, a small group of Auraria students and individuals from across the state watched the documentary and then discussed what they learned.

The event was hosted by PeaceJam Rocky Mountain, a non-profit organization that partners with Nobel Peace Prize winners to educate people about social justice. PeaceJam recently established a small chapter of their organization at MSU Denver.

The film was created by PeaceJam and documents the life of Nobel laureate and Mayan activist Rigoberta Menchú Tum.

According to the film, Tum was born in 1959 and grew up during the Guatemalan Civil War. From 1960-1996, the Guatemalan military tortured, kidnapped and killed indigenous Guatemalans in 626 separate massacres. By the end of the war, 200,000 people were killed.

At the height of the civil war in 1981, Tum fled to Mexico as a refugee. There she began to advocate for the rights of indigenous people and speak out against the brutality of the Guatemalan military.

In 1992, Tum was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work to achieve social justice and expand the rights of indigenous Guatemalans. She continues to work as a social justice activist, promoting the rights of refugees and indigenous people.
Kara Lundin, PeaceJam higher education coordinator, said the organization chose to show this film to increase the organization’s visibility on campus and educate people about Tum’s life work.

“In terms of social justice education, we’re looking to look at other perspectives, get other viewpoints, make sure everyone has access to education and resources that they need,” Lundin said.

Timothy Meeks, civic engagement program coordinator at the Applied Learning Center, said it is important to learn about social justice because it can make the world a better place.

“Throughout time, there’s always been social issues that have been both divisive and brings us together,” Meeks said. “And that’s what this group promotes, the positive of peace and bringing folks together to tackle issues, social issues that are around the globe.”

Carmen Arteaga, an audience member who drove from Pueblo to watch the film, considers Tum a role model. She said people deserve justice though different issues facing different communities.

“People need to be woke, to quote a term that’s been used,” Arteaga said. “They need to be woke to the fact that atrocities have happened all around them and they need to be aware so that they can be more sensitive to issues that’s happening in their own neighborhood.”

Dora Medina, a Guatemalan woman who helped Tum with her Nobel prize campaign, said things have changed since the civil war, but poverty and discrimination against the Mayan culture persists.

“Guatemala was like South Africa, since the Spanish came, that’s how it is,” Medina said.

During this period, government-sanctioned killings in Guatemala were similar to what happened in South Africa. Between 1948 and 1991, 21,000 native South Africans were killed, according to the Human Rights Committee.

“One thing that is important for us is to see we can finally work together and see a light for everybody and especially to make sure that everybody’s equal,” Medina said.

She went on to say the best way to combat discrimination is to educate yourself. She said this is important for Guatemalans because systemic violence against indigenous people is illegal, but social discrimination is not.

“For us it’s for our own because you grow up there and you don’t know exactly what’s going on,” Medina said. “People deny, ‘In Guatemala we don’t discriminate against indigenous people.’ But that’s not true, they still do.”
Lundin spoke from the perspective of the laureates when she described why they share their stories and work with PeaceJam.

“We want you to learn about our lives, not because we want you to know about us, but because we want you to see that one person can make a difference under the most dire circumstances,” Lundin said.

Mario Shinault, MSU Denver PeaceJam chapter president, said people can make positive social changes if they take the time to listen to others. Shinault said people can participate in the MSU Denver chapter if they look for flyers around campus and speak to PeaceJam representatives when they host tables at the Tivoli center.