

Anti-bullying film premieres Friday

By Jodi Heckel

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CHAMPAIGN – There may not be any Oscars handed out, but Friday night will be like Academy Awards night for a group of Franklin Middle School students.

The students helped write, produce and act in a film dealing with the issue of bullying. Their classmates and the community can see the result of their work when the film is shown at 7 p.m. Friday at the Virginia Theatre. The screening is free.

Students from an eighth-grade honors literacy class worked with Australian filmmaker Christopher Faull last fall. Faull produced a series of films on bullying and relationships in Australia, called "Stories of Us," for use in the classroom. The film he made at Franklin is designed for American students and teachers.

"I think it's by far the best," Faull said of the film he made at Franklin.

"I think (the students) responded very positively to the process and they really gave it their all. I think they valued it more here" than in Australia.

"I'm very, very pleased."

The students who worked on the film saw a rough cut of it last fall.

"They were just beside themselves," Faull said. "They were so proud, so happy."

Faull talked with the students about what they know and have seen of bullying, then took their ideas and formed them into a plot. Students acted in the film and helped with the behind-the-scenes work.

Because students were so involved with the production of the film, it has a realism that other young people can relate to, and they will identify emotionally with the characters, Faull said.

"Kids behave badly toward each other and sometimes don't realize how bad they are being. This holds a mirror up," he said. "Because they can identify with the characters, because it doesn't look like Hollywood, it looks and feels real, they can develop that empathy and can bring about change."

The new film, which runs about 25 minutes, is designed to be used in the classroom to help teachers talk with students about bullying. It is not just passive viewing, Faull said.

There are two versions of the film. The first is designed to get the students engaged in the story, and it ends at a crisis point that is left unresolved. After watching it, students discuss what might happen in the situation.

The second version of the film pauses at several points, at which students can discuss what is happening and the options available to the characters. At the end of this version are interviews with the main characters, which reveal how the situations ended.

The films are just part of a set of curriculum materials that include lesson plans for teachers to talk about the issues raised, including in-depth questions to prompt discussions of bullying, and other resources on bullying issues.

"It's designed to get them very focused on certain aspects of what's going on with certain relationships," Faull said. "It helps them know what to do with themselves in the future if something like that would happen to them."

Another set of materials is designed for professional development for teachers.

"It asks teachers in schools to look at their preconceptions about bullying, what their current understanding of bullying is, and to use the film as a way to explore how they can support kids," Faull said.

There is also a community education version of the package.

Along with the Franklin film, the curriculum package includes a second film Faull made with eighth-grade students in Lincoln, Neb. He said the two schools have different demographics and teachers can choose which might be most relevant to their students.

The films will be available to schools across the country, and they'll be marketed mainly through professional education associations. Faull said there has already been a great deal of interest in the films, even though the materials are not yet ready for distribution.

In Australia, the effect of the anti-bullying film made there was evaluated through the response of students to a statement – that kids who get bullied usually deserve it. Faull said the evaluation found a 20 percent reduction in students who agreed with that statement after they watched the film and discussed it.



John Dixon

Front row, from left, Melanie Mesker, 14, Michelle Canera, 13, and Tara Mobasser, 13, raise their hands with other girls in the class to indicate their desire to act in a film by Christopher Faull last August at Franklin Middle School in Champaign. The film will be screened for free at 7 p.m. Friday at the Virginia Theatre.

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