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Filmmaker studies bullying at Franklin Middle School

By Jodi Heckel

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CHAMPAIGN - It's a middle school cliché - the quiet, nerdy student being picked on by the big bully, who takes his lunch money or knocks the books out of his hands in the hallway.

That's not exactly how it happens in real life, say some students at Franklin Middle School. It's more likely a group of kids who make fun of another student because of how he acts or how she looks.

In an eighth-grade honors literacy class at Franklin, most of the students say they have been bullied at one time, and they see others being bullied.

The students have been discussing what it means to be bullied and how such incidents start, as the prelude to making a film about bullying. Australian filmmaker Christopher Faull is working with the students at Franklin, one of two locations in the U.S. where he's making films to be distributed to schools throughout the country.

He has produced a series of films, called "Stories of Us," in Australia that address bullying, relationships and stress. They come with guides for teachers to discuss the issues, and how to deal with them, with students.

He's now making American versions of the anti-bullying film and expanding the project significantly to include versions of the film for teachers and for parents. Faull came to Champaign to work with University of Illinois education Professor Dorothy Espelage, an expert on bullying.

Faull spends five to six weeks with a group of students, getting to know them and talking about the issue. He's meeting with the Franklin students several times a week, beginning this past week.

With Faull's help, the students brainstorm ideas for the film, develop the script, and then act in the film and work behind the scenes. They will also create their own documentary on the process, writing about it and taking video and still photographs as they work on the film.

"Everything that happens in this film is going to come from you," Faull told them as he explained the process to them.

He begins by asking a lot of questions, listening and taking notes. On Thursday, he asked them to talk about what they thought bullying was, how it happens, and how it differs between boys and girls.

The students said girls tend to bully verbally, by talking behind someone's back and gossiping. The incidents tend to drag on and become emotional and dramatic. The boys are more direct, swear more and are more likely to be physical, they said.

Faull is taking what the students tell him about bullying and shaping it into stories. He told the students the acting for the film won't be about memorizing a lot of lines. Rather, they'll work out the details of what is happening in a scene.

"You don't have to do anything but be normal, and think," he said. "It's more about reacting than acting. That's what you do in real life.

"What we end up with is a group of friends doing what they normally do under slightly artificial circumstances," he said.

Faull said students working on the films gain confidence, a sense of teamwork, and empathy for what other students are feeling. They also want adults to take bullying seriously, he said.

"They very clearly said parents and teachers don't know what's going on. They really want people to understand," Faull said, adding that students often feel reluctant to tell teachers or parents about bullying, fearful they'll become the bully's next target.

Shameem Rakha, who teaches the honors literacy class making the film, agreed teachers have a lot to learn from students.

"I don't know if I would recognize bullying if I saw it. I don't know what it looks like anymore," Rakha said, adding that bullying is more subtle now and often done via instant messaging, MySpace or text messages.

But, she said, "I see its implications, where self-esteem takes a nose dive."

She found one student last year in tears, afraid to leave the building at the end of the day because another student had threatened to beat him up.

Rakha believes the film may make some people uncomfortable, but she hopes it will make teachers at Franklin more aware of bullying, make those who have been bullied feel less isolated and give them ways to deal with such incidents while keeping their self-esteem intact.

Some of her students say their classmates turn away when they see someone bullied now, or they tolerate it.

"A lot of kids pretend it didn't happen, that they didn't see it. Others say, 'It was so funny what you said about her,'" said Laura Clark.

"When you see it, you know if you get involved with it, they're going to start attacking you," added David Kessler.

They think the film can change that, "if people really take to heart how it's hurting (students)," Kessler said.

Clark added: "We can help start people talking about bullying. Some kids might try to do something about it because they've seen how bad it can be."

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