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McKenzie Bonnett, 13, and Franklin Middle School classmates helped to write, produce and act in a film that aims to deter bullying in schools.

# Kid actors yell 'cut' on bullying

Film using Champaign students delivers urgent message on aggression

By Mary Ann Fergus  
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CHAMPAIGN—McKenzie Bonnett was a natural when it came to acting in a film about bullying. She had done it herself.

Before the fictional movie was shot last fall in their school, the 8th grader and her classmates were asked for examples of mean behavior. They promptly pitched in with everything from spreading rumors to name-calling.

"I realized that I had done half of these things before," said McKenzie, 13, who recalls how the experience left her ill at ease. "I was feeling 'Oh, no. I can't believe I have done that.'"

The pupils at Franklin Middle School tapped into those real-life experiences as they filmed "The Stories of Us," a 25-minute movie being sold to American schools as part of a new anti-bullying program. They wrote, produced and acted in the film, which many educators say looks more like a documentary than make-believe.

Directed by Australian filmmaker Christopher Faull, the movie offers an emotional story that involves boys and girls. As the drama unfolds, it becomes painfully clear how seemingly minor rumors or incidents can escalate for the victims, especially with the help of cell phones and the Internet.

Franklin will be among the first group of U.S. schools to use the film and accompanying curriculum next year, Principal Angela Smith said. A Chicago native, Smith is familiar with the violence that has killed 23 Chicago Public Schools students this year. She believes that



McKenzie Bonnett (center), 13, jokes with friends in the library at Franklin Middle School in Champaign. McKenzie says she was bullied in the 5th grade and then bullied other students in the 6th and 7th grades.

addressing bullying early can help stem bloodshed later.

Nationally, students increasingly say they have been victimized by bullies. The number of those age 12 to 18 who report the problem has grown from 5 percent in 1999 to 28 percent in 2005, the U.S. Department of Justice said.

Dorothy Espelage, who teaches educational psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, encouraged Faull to tackle the project after seeing his Australian films on the subject.

Few anti-bullying programs offer the authenticity of the Champaign film, Espelage said.

"Typically, what happens in most programs is that there's little input from kids," said Espelage, one of the film's consultants.

McKenzie's personal journey from victim to bully followed a typical path. The teen said she was bullied in 5th grade when three girls stuck weekly notes in her locker with messages such as, "You're stu-

pid and ugly" and "We don't like you."

McKenzie said she never told a teacher or confronted her tormentors because the experience was so new to her. Instead, like most victims, she felt like an outcast.

By the 6th and 7th grades, McKenzie found herself turning on others, often spreading rumors about false crushes, eavesdropping or exaggerating the truth.

"It felt good—it was kinda like power," she said. "I can make you feel this way and you can't do anything about it."

But McKenzie's life was changing at home, she said. Her parents were getting a divorce, and she feared an older brother was going to be deployed to Iraq. She now believes she didn't know where to place her anger, so it flashed out at classmates. Anger, experts confirm, is the top predictor for bullying.

In the movie, McKenzie's character, Ally, begins treating a class-

mate poorly over an unsubstantiated rumor with the help of girlfriends, or what bullying experts call "reinforcers." They set up a blind date between the victim and a boy and then take a cell phone photo of the pair and post it on a Web page similar to that of MySpace or Facebook.

The scene isn't far off from middle school reality. Last year, McKenzie said she and some friends posted nasty comments on a Web site about an unpopular classmate.

"We knew it was wrong," admits friend and co-star Tara Mobasseri, who also lives in Champaign. "But we didn't care because we didn't like her."

That barbed example was stunningly close to what happened to Carolyn Muller, the pupil who plays McKenzie's victim.

Earlier this year, boys posted a doctored photo of Carolyn on a Web site, replete with red eyes and scars. Carolyn showed the photo to her mother and a teacher, and the boys were punished. But many kids hesitate to take such action.

"I've heard people in classrooms bullying others and say, 'Don't be a snitch or we'll get you worse,'" Carolyn said. "There's the fear factor: 'I don't want to make this worse than it already is.'"

The movie, which provides moments for class discussion, also offers a male story. In the end, Carolyn's character reports the episode and later talks about the impact of the bullying, as does Ally who shows little remorse.

In real life, the experience encouraged McKenzie to change her attitudes and behavior, she said. She doesn't like to see how much pain her character caused in the film. It was all too familiar.

"I just had to take a step back and look at myself," she said.

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