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## Franklin students take bullying by the horns

By Jodi Heckel

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CHAMPAIGN – A girl feels slighted by a friend, so she tells a lie about her, causing others to turn against the friend as well. They post an embarrassing photo and derogatory comments about her on a MySpace site.

A boy whose parents are breaking up takes his anger out by bullying another boy and eventually beating him up.

Those stories may be fictional, but they are based on real accounts of bullying from Franklin Middle School students. The stories will be told in a film aimed at helping kids understand the effects of bullying and how they can make choices that will reduce the problem.

A group of eighth-grade honors literacy students at Franklin has been working with Australian filmmaker Chris Faull since late August. The students are acting in the film and working behind the scenes, and they helped develop the script. Filming began Tuesday and continues next week.

Getting young people such as those at Franklin involved in formulating solutions for bullying is important, said Erika Harold, an Urbana native who was Miss America in 2003. She talked about the effects of bullying during her year as Miss America and has remained involved in anti-bullying initiatives since.

She was the victim of bullying while a student at University Laboratory High School in Urbana.

"It gets kids to think about the problem and take ownership of the solution," Harold said. "I think programs that just tell kids what not to do and don't let them engage in the solution aren't nearly as effective."

"I think that's key – getting kids to think about the issue and that they are the ones responsible for initiating change," she said.

Faull talked with the Franklin students about what they've seen or experienced regarding bullying to come up with the stories in the film and learn how, for example, a group of girls might go from being friends to turning on each other.

"There's nothing I made up. It's all come from them," he said.

"It's like a jigsaw puzzle," Faull continued. "They've given me all pieces. I've simply constructed it into something ... that's real to them."

Franklin student David Kessler plays the boy who gets beat up in the film. He said there are incidents in the hallway leading up to the fight, such as threats and tripping, that should seem realistic to his classmates.

"We've seen stuff like this before, so we wanted to pick real stuff that might happen," Kessler said. "It's something real that all kids can relate to."

He also said the students changed some dialogue, such as when his character confronts the bully, to make it sound more like what a middle school student might say, rather than an adult.

Faull says the students who worked on the film have "a more sophisticated understanding of (bullying). I think they understand more about the subtleties of how things develop and are perpetuated."

But, he says, the people who will learn the most are students who see the film and identify on an emotional level with the characters. The film will have both a version for students to watch and discuss, and a version for teachers to talk about how they might handle a situation and what systems they have in place to address bullying.

Once he's finished filming, Faull will spend about a month editing the five days of footage down to 20 to 22 minutes. The final version will be finished early next year, he said.

Franklin Middle School has tried to increase awareness of the problem by having counselors talk to students about bullying and teach coping skills. Nancy Hill, the school's social worker, said it's important to not only tell students what they shouldn't be doing, but also to teach them how they should act.

"At this age, there's not a lot of empathy," Hill said. "That's one of the things we try to work on here - building empathy and understanding for what kids might be feeling. Age-wise, it's not a well-developed characteristic yet."

Middle school students are also trying to fit in with a group of friends, said Myra Gillespie, the school psychologist at Franklin.

"Making fun of others can become a middle school way to fit in," she said. "Kids have a hard time standing up for themselves and standing up for others, because then you become a target."

Harold said she was encouraged to learn that bullying can be prevented and that research has shown schools can reduce the amount of bullying that goes on with the right kinds of programs.

"I think most people view bullying as inevitable and wonder if we should devote time and resources to bullying," Harold said.

But, she added, "I've seen people taking this issue much more seriously because they realize bullying is a precursor to violence."

### **Parents can look for signs of bullying**

CHAMPAIGN - One of the hardest things for parents and teachers to know about bullying is when it is happening.

It can be difficult for a school to measure how much bullying is going on, because it can be subtle, it is usually done out of sight of teachers, and students often don't report it. It may be taking place in cyberspace, in the form of text messages or comments on a social networking site, such as MySpace.

In the case of girls, bullying may not be threats or physical violence, but shunning someone.

Teachers and administrators can look at discipline incidents at a school. Myra Gillespie, school psychologist at Franklin Middle School, said a fight at the school may turn out to have started with a previous bullying incident.

For parents, too, bullying may be hard to spot.

"One thing parents need to be aware of is their kid is unlikely to come home and tell them they are being harassed," said Erika Harold, an Urbana native and Miss America 2003, who has been active in anti-bullying initiatives.

"I think kids feel a great deal of shame," she said. "They think it's something they caused and something they should be responsible for ending."

Parents need to ask their children questions about what is happening at school, she said. They can also look for signs, such as a dramatic change in a child's circle of friends, if a child suddenly doesn't want to go to school, or if he or she is more moody than usual and begins lashing out at younger siblings.

"I think initiating conversation on a fairly regular basis is the key," Harold said.

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