It's time to take a stand

by Meredith Jacobs
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Children are not supposed to die before their parents. Certainly not by their own hands. And yet, for some victims of bullying, suicide is the only escape.

Boys will be boys. Kids can be cruel. Platitudes since the time of Cain and Abel. But what is happening today among children goes beyond the teasing of generations past.

"The problem of bullying is incredibly pervasive. It's over 13 million kids in the U.S. alone, each year," says Lee Hirsch in a videotaped interview at the Jewish teen movement, BBYO 2012 International Convention (IC), "It's the way, I think, a lot of youth in America experience violence for the first time."

Hirsch, a young Jewish man who was bullied as a child, is the director of Bully, a powerful documentary that held a private screening this past Sunday at the Landmark Theater in Bethesda before a sold-out audience of BBYO teens.

"Bullying is an overexposed term that is sometimes used incorrectly," explains Andrew McGahan, JSSA's clinical director, child and family services. "Bullying is ongoing, there is an imbalance of power and there is intent to cause harm or discomfort." There is a difference between bullying and what may be a developmentally appropriate behavior.

That said, he agrees bullying is on the rise. "Children are being raised differently," he says. There is less of a sense of community today, which can isolate socially challenged children. Additionally, in previous generations, special needs children were separated in special classrooms or schools. Today they are mainstreamed. Bullying is about getting a reaction. There is almost an entertainment aspect for the bully. Special needs children can react in extreme ways, which makes them targets. There is also that imbalance of power.
The film depicts a year in the life of five families with children who are bullied. At least two of the children are on the Autism spectrum. At least one of the teens is gay. Each family provides a safe and loving home. Each set of parents is aware of their child's victimization and advocates on his or her behalf - turning to school administrators and police officers. Some of the children stand up for themselves (one by refusing to shake hands with his aggressor and one by bringing a gun onto the school bus). Two commit suicide.

One has friends.

The parents of Tyler Long and Ty Smalley created viral campaigns in memory of their sons that led to vigils. It is their hope that their boys' voices will be heard.

It is BBYO's goal to have 1 million Jewish teens not only hear these voices but then use their voices to lead the movement to stop bullying.

"We initially got involved with The Bully Project because we were looking for ways to amplify our Stand UP for Each Other Campaign," explains Avery Budman, a spokesperson for BBYO. Stand UP for Each Other is an initiative launched in conjunction with Stand UP (BBYO's teen-run grassroots philanthropy and advocacy campaigns) that raises awareness for respect and inclusion for all Jewish teens.

This campaign was launched in conjunction with the Coalition for Jewish Teens which currently consists of representatives from BBYO, URJ NFTY (Reform Judaism's youth movement) and Young Judaea.

"After doing some research, we reached out to the film and let them know about our broad network of 30,000+ who were interested in this cause, and it was a natural fit for a partnership. Part of our original vision was bringing Lee Hirsch and Mr. and Mrs. Long to International Convention and sharing the film with the teens who would be trained as facilitators at community screenings."

Seven teens from the D.C. Council of BBYO were selected to participate in the training. Of those, 17-year-old Carly Rosenthal, 16-year-old Brandon Myers and Jacob Brown and 15-year-old Sofie Jacobs facilitated a program after Sunday's screening. The four helped the audience process what they had seen, connect it to Jewish values and then discuss moments in the film that were most impactful.

"Many of the Jewish morals we learn can have a lot of influence in our lives, but usually we don't know how to apply them," said Jacobs, who is the former sh'lichah (sorority member responsible for social action and Jewish heritage programming) for BBG chapter Beth Kadima. "But this was inspiring. It connected me to Judaism more because it actually applies to my life."

"I have been a bystander and an upstander as well," said Brown, who is past-president of Lantos AZA (a chapter in the boys division of BBYO). Brown wasn't familiar with the film until he was asked to participate in the screening at the convention. "It really sticks with you," he said of the film.

Each AZA and BBG chapter selects a "Stand UP" cause each semester and creates awareness and fundraising campaigns for that cause. Lantos had chosen LGBT rights as its "Stand UP" and raised money for "It Gets Better" (a campaign to help victimized LGBT
teens). After facilitating the program in Bethesda, Brown said, "We can use our shaliach [AZA member responsible for social action and Jewish heritage programming] to do more. There were 250 people here today, and there was a waiting list. That amazes me."

Estee and Elliott Portnoy underwrote Sunday's screening. Estee Portnoy serves as the chair of the BBYO International Board of Directors. As Michael Jordan's business manager, she is involved in many organizations including Jewish and special needs causes. Upon seeing the film at the convention in February, she felt her "worlds collide."

"This movie really hit me," said Portnoy. Growing up in a small western Pennsylvania town, she reports being "bullied on the school bus because I am Jewish and because I am the child of Holocaust survivors. The bus driver thought it was funny." She survived, she said, "because I had BBYO."

Portnoy echoes a message that comes through in the film - having a support group of peers, having friends, is a lifeline for victims.

Alex, the key subject of the film, is on the Autism spectrum. When his parents try to explain to him that the kids bullying him are not his friends, he replies, "Well, if they are not my friends, who are my friends?"

It is a heartbreaking moment.

"We need to be allies," said Rosenthal after Sunday's viewing. "We need to take it personally and stand up and take action."

Myers, a past-president of Melech AZA, mapped out a plan of action for the teens, "First change yourself and help out. Then spread awareness. Be the leader. Be the friend."

"We have all these leaders in this room. We are the change."

The movie ends with the reminder that "It starts with one." Said Debi Tozer, program director for BBYO Northern Region East, "Our intention is that everyone in this room become 'one.' Using the platform of Stand UP for Each Other, each teen can be the voice for people who need extra help speaking on their own."

"It brings it closer to home that it is a Jewish organization who partnered with the movie," said Rosenthal, who is a past vice president of BBYO chapter Oseh Shalom. "The most important thing is, this is our community. We are starting at home."

Partnering nationally with Keshet (an organization working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life), URJ NFTY, Repair the World (a Jewish service-learning organization) and Facing History and Ourselves (an organization using education to combat bigotry and nurture democracy), BBYO envisions a multiphased approach to end bullying. These national partners were joined by local partners Temple Shalom of Chevy Chase, Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation, Tzofim (Scouts) and Congregation Beth El of Montgomery County on Sunday.

"We're working for generational behavioral change," says Ian Kandel, director of AZA and BBG. Sunday's screening of the film in 14 BBYO regions across the U.S. will be followed up by eventual screenings of the film at summer camps. BBYO is also reaching out to 1,000
community professionals who work with teens. The hope is to generate programming, created both by the teens and by the professionals, maximizing the film and reaching as many teens as possible.

It's a plan that just might work. When going up against bullying, "the power is definitely with the bystanders," explained McGahan. "Teens react to peers more than adults. If a peer is saying, 'I don't like that, I'm not okay with that,' they'll hear that - even more so than another adult telling them what to do."

And when it comes to being a friend to the victim, that can make the difference between life and death.

BBYO is also asking teens and adults to sign pledge cards with adults promising to listen and act immediately on behalf of bullied young people. Teens are asked to do more:

*I will speak up* - *I will take a stand when I see kids humiliating or hurting each other. I will talk about bullying with my friends and the adults in my life, so everyone knows I think it's wrong.*

*I will advocate* - *I will stick up for others who might be in need of my help, and not just my closest friends.*

*I will be a role model* - *I will not use my phone or computer to spread rumors or say hateful things, and I won't ignore it when others are cruel and intimidating.*

**Stopping bullying begins with me.**

*To support BBYO's Stand UP For Each Other campaign and contribute to The Bully Project's goal to reach one million teens, go to bbyo.org/bully.*