



When documentarian Lee Hirsch decided in 2008 to do a film on bullying, he never envisioned the far-reaching impact it would have. Since its premiere at the 2011 Tribeca Film Festival, *Bully* has been seen by more than three million middle and high school students in educational settings nationwide, engaged some 530,000 people on Facebook, screened at the White House and on Capitol Hill, and inspired The Bully Project, a social-action campaign to end bullying that promotes solutions and provides related materials. Regional Bully Project teams have formed in 24 states and the program’s 10 Million Kids initiative has made Educator’s DVD Activation Toolkits available at a nominal fee of \$35 to thousands of educators across the country.

“The Bully Project has really become a movement...and our 10 Million Kids campaign has exceeded beyond our wildest dreams,” says Hirsch by phone from the project’s Manhattan offices on a Monday afternoon. “So it’s really turned into something extraordinary and everyday we hear stories of impact.”

The award-winning *Bully*, cited by The Huffington Post as an “important and powerful film,” follows several families from Georgia, Oklahoma, Mississippi and Iowa as they struggle with the physical and/or mental anguish resulting from bullying.



FOR SOME, THE ATTACKS ARE NOT ONLY HURTFUL, BUT ALSO RELENTLESS; FOR OTHERS, THEY HAVE LED TO A PARENTS' WORST NIGHTMARE.

Hirsch found most of his subjects through news stories, and secured Sioux City, IA’s East Middle School as his main filming location. Cindy Waitt, executive director of the Waitt Institute for Violence Prevention in Sioux City, had battled bullying in that community for years and brokered introductions for Hirsch with the local school board and administration. She ultimately served as an executive producer of the documentary, which Hirsch shot over one school year with funding from Indiegogo crowdsourcing and numerous donors, including the Fledgling Fund, Sundance Documentary Fund, Einhorn Family Charitable Trust, Waitt



Institute, Cinereach, BeCause Foundation and National Center for Learning Disabilities. To the dismay of everyone involved with the film, as well as much of the general public, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) initially gave *Bully* an R-rating for language, which would have prevented anyone under 17—its prime audience—from seeing it without a parent. A bit of editing and a Change.org petition prompted the MPAA to eventually change the rating to PG-13.

“It just seemed outrageous,” recalls Hirsch. “But it was quite a battle actually, and it was great to see people really rally around the film.”

Hirsch thinks the movie gave the featured kids and families a sense of pride and strength,

which spurred them to actively advocate against bullying. Parents of the bullies, although understandably upset, signed waivers in solidarity of the documentary. And when events started to unravel at the middle school in Sioux City, the superintendent stood by the film and allowed Hirsch to continue.

“I REALLY TRY TO MAKE MY FILMS FROM A PLACE OF LOVE...AND THAT REALLY RESONATED WITH ALL THE FAMILIES AND ALL THE KIDS.”

And I think for Alex (the central subject), too, that someone was there that he could open up to, that listened and understood, was really,

really powerful and meaningful,” Hirsch says. “With Alex, it was really hard because in some ways I had to bear witness to what was happening and then there came a point where we actually intervened in the story...I was surprised at the lack of intervention, I was surprised at the lack of engagement [by the school].

“When you see a lot cases of bullying where the student and the parents have already been to the school, have asked for help, and yet it just continues...or nothing gets done that actually addresses the issue or resolves it for that individual...that’s really hard.”

And Hirsch should know, having been bullied himself as a kid. When, after releasing *Bully*, he returned to the Long Island, New York, middle school where he was victimized, the climate had changed dramatically with an extensive anti-bullying program in place. What made his visit especially sweet was learning that the school’s entire student body and faculty saw the documentary together and were so moved by it, they later silently marched around the athletic track in tribute.

These days Hirsch is busy with The Bully Project, traveling globally to screen his film and continue the dialogue. “This isn’t easy work. There are no band-aid solutions to these problems,” he says, noting that both schools and parents must play a huge role. “It’s the responsibility of a school to create a safe and supportive learning

environment for all students...when a school starts to address this holistically, it lowers the bullying on campus, but it also lifts everybody’s experience and will actually create a better performing school.

THAT’S THE IDEOLOGY, THAT’S THE THINKING, BEHIND WHAT’S CALLED SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING, AND PARENTS SHOULD BE ENGAGING NOT JUST WITH THEIR KIDS, BUT WITH THE SCHOOL, AND LETTING THE SCHOOL KNOW THEY WANT A SAFE ENVIRONMENT.

Hirsch feels positive about the state of his cause, but still would like to see more professional development surrounding bullying as well as classroom-management study for those pursuing education careers, and state and federal legislation that holds schools more accountable. “Nowadays we hold schools accountable by testing, scores, and performance. The idea equal to that is how schools perform on a school-climate assessment. How many students feel safe? How many students feel connected? That should be a part of the evaluation process.”