

Telling the Stories

Making BULLY involved more than a year of following stories and shooting footage in several schools and communities around the United States. Much of what director Lee Hirsch captured on film did not make it into the final version of the film. As with many documentaries, making BULLY involved making difficult choices about what to include and what to leave out. In a conversation with Facing History and Ourselves, Hirsch reflected on the stories he documented and how he decided what to include in the film.¹

Facing History: How did you get permission to film inside schools, particularly in Sioux City [Alex's hometown]?

Hirsch: We had been trying to find schools to film in for quite some time, and we were finding that it was very, very difficult. Most places were highly unreceptive to the idea. It was a great miracle that we connected with the Waitt Institute for Violence Prevention (WIVP) which is based out of Sioux City, and they had invested deeply in the school district there with an anti-bully curriculum, mentoring programs, and gender violence prevention work for probably nearly a decade. It was a perfect storm of having a strong and meaningful introduction to the school district, coupled with a relatively new and progressive superintendent.

We were able to meet the superintendent, present our idea about what we were trying to achieve, and get his buy-in about the value of being able to be inside a school to see what happens, both good and bad. I think that they certainly hoped that it would represent more of the good, but understood that being willing to put themselves out there would be a great value to the nation in a way, to everyone who is trying to do this [respond to bullying], and that they would grow from it and see things that they don't normally see. We were then able to make a presentation before the school board, who took a vote and decided to allow us to come in and film.

We were basically offered carte blanche to a number of schools in the district, and it was left up to us to decide where and how we would focus. . . . We went and shared our vision again with the staff at East Middle School [Alex's school] prior to the start of the school year, and we were also introduced at the first assembly to the students, and we talked to them about what we were doing. So it was a very interesting and a very transparent process. We were given permission to shoot on buses, to shoot inside the principal's office, to be able to capture the full scope of how this stuff works. We also have releases from all of the families of the kids that appear and speak in the film. The families of the bullies in the film all agreed to participate knowing that their child was on film behaving as a bully.

You kept an eye on a lot of stories at once. What criteria did you use to choose which ones to follow more closely?

We were pretty locked into Alex early on. And we were struggling to feel the narrative arc or the urgency in other stories we were following, particularly in the high school. We invested nearly an equal amount of time into filming at the high school in Sioux City, which was a very, very different school. . . . West [High School] had and continues to have really strong and good leadership, and a really strong mentoring program. The difference in culture was like night and day. You could feel it when you walked into the building. You felt it immediately that you were in a different kind of place, where people treated each other better. Ultimately we weren't able to piece together a story out of West, in part because good climate and culture don't manifest

themselves as drama. We wanted to really include that world and that culture and what they had achieved there into the film and just ultimately couldn't. When you build a film, you're building blocks that build onto each other narratively; they each have to stand with the one before and the one after it in terms of being relevant, compelling, and meaningful. It was really hard to weave a good normal day into the narrative. Those are some of the things we wrestled with.

I would say that Alex for us was really— for one, we really just fell in love with him and his family. And two, they really let us into their lives. Alex was utterly unaware of the camera. Who he was, in fact his whole family really, they were exactly who they are with the cameras on and with the cameras off. That also matters when you are making a film. You really want to be with someone who is comfortable and open and does let you in that way. All of the families, all the kids, that are in the film, I saw them as partners in telling the story. With each of them, we talked about the meaning of their decision to let us film their struggles and let us into their lives. I was able to share with them my experiences, and why I wanted to make this film, and why I felt their participation was going to make a difference for others. And they universally stepped up to that call and participated for that reason. . . .

It factors back to another universal feeling that I have, which is the kids that are bullied want to have a voice, they want truth, they want to show the world that "this is what I go through and you guys don't listen to me, but it's really bad, it's really, really hard, and I carry this around every day on my own." That is reflected in the ways in which kids write about bullying, they blog about it, think about it, Facebook about it; when there is a local story they write about it, all of those things are reflective of the kind of battling in silence that is part of the landscape.

What was hardest for you to cut from the film?

There were a lot of things that were hard to cut from the film. There was a story that we spent a lot of time on with two families in North Texas. Two boys, Cain and Joe, were both being bullied in the same middle

school. We really struggled to put that story in. It fit into a larger story of the fight the parents were having with the school. There had been five suicides within 20 miles of their school. Cain went and spoke to the school board and he clearly articulated the abuse and the things that he went through. You develop strong relationships with your subjects and it's very disappointing to have to ultimately pick up that phone and say, "All those weeks we spent together, all that we shared, unfortunately did not make it into the film." That's very, very difficult.

As a filmmaker, maybe a big part of what you're working up against is simply the amount of time you have to tell the story, which in the face of the story that you are telling doesn't seem like enough.

You are working with time. You are working with how many story lines you can juggle with your audience. How does each story feed into the next? What's the connective fiber? How does David Long saying Tyler had a target on his back link to Alex getting off the school bus and walking home? Those are things with your editing team you really work on because you want your audience to be with you. . . . Also the West High stories were really, really hard to leave out. It was the same kind of phone call: "Hey we filmed in your school for an entire year, but you're not in the movie. Why? Because you were doing things too well." It's a very difficult phone call to make. I can tell you something else, some of those scenes were in play until two weeks before we were finished. . . .

It's hard to leave things out. We had a very robust dialogue when editing a sequence that involved Alex having a really good ride on the bus where he was getting along with all the other kids and laughing. I desperately wanted it in the film and ultimately it was just too confusing. Even in the landscape of bullying, you do have good days and bad days, moments where that's all kind of gone away for a minute and you're just happy and you feel like a normal kid. That's another thing that's difficult to leave out.

Connections

In the moments you were filming incidents of bullying, did you ever feel that you should intervene directly to stop the harassment?

It was incredibly difficult not to go and rip those kids off of Alex. Had the violence increased, I'm sure there was a point at which I would have had to, and would have absolutely stopped it. But the reality is that Alex wanted people to know what happens to him. And all of the kids that were in this film wanted people to know what they go through.

A significant part of this journey was and remains the relationship developed between me and the film subjects. The kids and their parents became our partners. Alex and I talked regularly about what was going on in school and what he felt comfortable with having on film. One of the hardest things for a kid who is bullied is to have that evidence to show adults, their parents, and the community what he or she actually endures. The power and strength of having these experiences on film is that they become real and not just testimonial.

Documentary filmmakers generally try not to make themselves part of the story they are documenting. But what we saw on that final bus ride with Alex was so alarming that it became a breaking point for us. Though it was a difficult decision in the moment, we decided to bring evidence of what was happening to the school, Alex's parents, and the Sioux City police department. This absolutely put us into the story and is acknowledged in the film.



Lee Hirsch/The Weinstein Company

1. Which of Hirsch's comments are most helpful to you in understanding and processing the film? What questions about the film do you still have? The full interview with Hirsch is available at www.facinghistory.org/safeschools.
2. Which of the stories that were cut from the film would you most like to learn more about? What would you hope to learn from them?
3. Hirsch comments that, when he walked into Sioux City's West High School, "You felt it immediately that you were in a different kind of place, where people treated each other better." How do you account for Hirsch's feeling? What might he have seen or heard that indicated he was in a healthy, respectful environment?
4. How might including footage of "good days" and more positive school environments have changed the impact of the film? If the filmmakers were to make another film about bullying, what types of stories would be most interesting and helpful to you?

Classroom Suggestions

The *Think, Pair, Share* strategy (on page 52) provides students the opportunity to discuss the choices Hirsch made in the film, first in discussion with a partner, and then with the entire class. You can use the Connections questions to begin the conversation.

Notes

1 Lee Hirsch, interview by author, telephone, October 13, 2011.

Classroom Suggestions

The *Save the Last Word for Me* strategy (page 54) provides an effective format for encouraging every student to think deeply about the experiences of those who are bullied in the film. The structure that this strategy puts in place facilitates careful listening and ensures that every voice is heard.

Connections

1. Which parts of the film had the greatest impact on you?
2. Pointing to the prevalence of journals, blogs, and videos posted online by victims of bullying, Hirsch observes a universal feeling: "Kids who are bullied want to have a voice."³ In what ways are the voices of young people who are bullied diminished or ignored in our society? How does BULLY amplify the voices of those who are bullied?
3. What is *empathy*? How does the film help us build empathy for the targets of bullying? How might increasing empathy help a community reduce the amount of bullying that occurs?
4. Hirsch chose to focus the film solely on the stories of those who are victimized by bullying. What might we learn about bullying from their stories? What might we learn from experts? What other perspectives would be helpful?
5. BULLY does not provide any stories or details about the students who behave as bullies. Why do you think that the filmmaker chose not to include the bully's perspective?
6. Define *courage* and *resilience*. In what ways are the young people we meet in this film courageous? In what ways are they resilient? What is the difference between the two?
7. Recent insights from neuroscience suggest that the distress caused by social exclusion or disapproval activates the same regions of the brain that are active when one feels physical pain. In other words, the body responds to physical and

emotional pain similarly.⁴ How might these findings deepen our understanding of and empathy for victims of bullying?

8. Although the fact is not shared in the film, Alex has Asperger's Syndrome. Tyler Long had it, too. People with Asperger's, an autism spectrum disorder, often have difficulty perceiving nonverbal social cues and expressing empathy. How might this disorder make one more vulnerable to bullying and harassment?

Unlike many physical disabilities, Asperger's Syndrome is not a condition that is immediately visible to others. How might the visibility of one's disability change how he or she is treated by others?

9. Hirsch says that he chose not to reveal in the film that Alex and Tyler have Asperger's because he did not want to provide the audience with easy excuses for their victimization. "We didn't want anything to make the audience think, 'Oh, well that explains it, well of course,'"⁵ he says. What other types of easy excuses might people make when explaining why certain people are the victims of bullying?
10. In the excerpt above, Alex shares, "They push me so far that, that I want to become the bully." Although Alex does not become a bully, many bullying targets share his sentiment. How do you explain Alex's desire to bully?

Researchers estimate that from one-third to one-half of those who bully are bullied as well.⁶ This group is often referred to as *bully-victims*, those who are bullies to some and targets of bullying by others. What does the existence of bully-victims suggest about the nature of bullying? Is Eve S. (from "The 'In' Group") a bully-victim? What might motivate one who is a victim of bullying to torment others?

11. Hirsch wonders why our society allows young people to torment each other in ways that would never be acceptable among adults:

How much abuse is too much when bullying is involved? When does the assault reach a threshold where it's too much in society's viewpoint? If an adult was to strike another adult twice, that adult would be in jail. You would have a restraining order, society would say that's not acceptable. But some of these kids endure what amounts to torture. The daily abuse is significant. So when we talk about Ja'Meya, it's a delicate conversation to have

because obviously you don't want to send the message that if you are being bullied you can pull a gun out, but [where] does a kid who's not getting help from adults or from her peers. . . turn to? Sadly one of the other places they turn to is suicide, when they feel like they can get no relief.⁷

Do you agree with Hirsch that bullying is as serious as assault and abuse between adults? When young people are getting bullied, whom can they turn to for support? How do you explain why they do not always get the support they need?

Notes

- 1 Lee Hirsch, interview by author, telephone, October 13, 2011.
- 2 BULLY, directed by Lee Hirsch, 2011.
- 3 Lee Hirsch, interview by author, telephone, October 13, 2011.
- 4 Tracy Vaillancourt, Shelley Hymel, and Patricia McDougall, "Why does being bullied hurt so much?: Insights from Neuroscience" (2004), in *Bullying in North American Schools*, ed. Dorothy L. Espelage and Susan M. Swearer, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 26–28.
- 5 Lee Hirsch, interview by author, telephone, October 13, 2011.
- 6 Rene Veenstra et al., "Bullying and Victimization in Elementary Schools: A Comparison of Bullies, Victims, Bully/Victims, and Uninvolved Preadolescents," *Developmental Psychology* 41, no. 4 (2005): 673, accessed October 25, 2011, http://www.gmw.rug.nl/~veenstra/CV/TRAILS_Veenstra_DP05.pdf.
- 7 Lee Hirsch, interview by author, telephone, October 13, 2011.

Adult Intervention

Parents are not the only adults who struggle to find out what is going on in the social lives of children. Most bullying occurs out of sight of teachers and school administrators as well. Often the first step to intervening is for adults to try to determine exactly what is happening, but the truth can be elusive. Students who bully are unlikely to admit the torment they cause. Bystanders, for a variety of reasons, including fear of being bullied themselves, are often reticent to turn in the tormenters.¹ Also, children who are bullied often do not want to admit to their vulnerability and inability to make the harassment stop.² Finally, victims of bullying often think that adults will make the situation worse.

As a result, when adults attempt to intervene in bullying and other social conflicts, they often find themselves acting with an incomplete understanding of the situation. *BULLY* includes some powerful examples of this dynamic as it unfolds. Consider the efforts of Kim Lockwood, an assistant principal in Sioux City, to mediate a conflict between two boys as they come in from recess:

Kim Lockwood Cole, you stay right here. Right here. I'm going to ask you guys to shake hands. Can you do that?

Glen Yeah.

Kim Lockwood Cole! Cole, you are not going anywhere. He is offering his hand and let this drop.

Cole Ohhh. [Refuses to shake hands.]

Kim Lockwood [To Glen] You may go. Cole, I expected more.

Cole He criticizes me every single day.

Kim Lockwood Then why are you around him?

Cole I don't, he comes to me. I try to get away, he follows me. And then he criticizes me calling me a p-u-s-s-y.

Kim Lockwood Okay, honey, that's not right, and he shouldn't do that.

Cole I don't even know why.

Kim Lockwood But you know what, he was trying to say he was sorry.

Cole He already did and he didn't mean it because it continued on.

Kim Lockwood You didn't mean it when you stuck out your hand either. So that means you're just like him, right, what you don't like in him, you —

Cole Except I don't hurt people.

Kim Lockwood By not shaking his hand, you're just like him.

Cole Like someone who punches you into walls, threatens to break your arm, threatens to stab you and kill you.

Kim Lockwood Okay.

Cole Shoot you with a gun?

Kim Lockwood He a—, he apologized. And have you reported all that sort of stuff?

Cole Yes.

Kim Lockwood Okay, then it's been taken care of.

Cole And all of them said, even the cops told him to stay away from me, and he doesn't.

Kim Lockwood Okay, can you try and get along? I think you guys might be really good friends at some time.

Cole We were. And then he started bullying me.²

In the documentary film, *Bully*, Lee Hirsch does not explicitly assign blame to specific individuals for the disturbing situations presented in the film, nor does he make overt suggestions for reforms or improvements; however, he curates the film so as to primarily present adults at the guilty parties (incompetent administrators) and agents for positive change (parents organizing rallies). Do you agree with this assessment?

PART ONE: Who do you think is primarily responsible for the damage inflicted by bullies? Is it the child bullies or the adults and systems that create and support them? Support your answer with specific evidence from the film and / or your own experiences.

PART TWO: Who do you think is primarily responsible for changing and improving this situation? Is it the bullies, the bystanders, the children being bullies, the parents, the teachers, the administrators, or some combination of all these parties? More importantly, WHAT do you think should be done? As we know from reading the interview with Lee Hirsch, he intentionally does NOT include in the film school where things are going well. What is the difference between schools and communities where students feel safe and supported and those where they do not? What can you – as a student – do to effect change for the better? Support your answer with specific evidence from the film and / or your own experiences.
