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Miramonte Drama Brings it Home to OIS

By Lou Fancher



Miramonte High School drama students "on the bus" in a bullying play at OIS Photo Ohlen Alexander know," said Katie Rich, the director of the 6th grade play. "It's not what you think a 6th grader experiences; it's what you know."

Rich's play-about how teasing escalates and intimidates, harming everyone in its path-held the OIS students spellbound.

In a question and answer session immediately following, they asked, Why were you intimidated? Why didn't you have more courage? Why did you still ask her out after she made fun of you?

The actors, staying in character, gave callous answers when cast in the role of a bully, or fragile, fearful answers, when playing a victim.

Seventh grade students asked different questions after watching a second play about cliques.

"Why pick on one person for so long?" a boy wondered.

"Why are you so mean to each other?" another asked.

"Would you want to be in their spot?" asked a boy, becoming a rare example of someone who might stand up to a bully.

In fact, reporting a bully is so uncommon that a recent case in Pennsylvania, involving 13-year-old Nadin Khoury, who was kicked, dragged, and hanged by his coat from a tree, was enough of a sensation to land him on national television. It wasn't so much the attack as it was the follow-through and accountability demanded of his assailants that drew attention to the eighth-grade boy.

Telling his story on The View, Khoury was rewarded with a surprise visit from his hero, DeSean Jackson of the Philadelphia Eagles. Jackson complimented Khoury's bravery, handing him a jersey and offering future game tickets.

While admittedly less glamorous, the results of the workshops at OIS are no less significant. Cousins reported that several participants in her high school drama class remembered learning new tools to combat bullying while attending the event as middle school students.

The eighth grade presentation provided the strongest example of why kids teaching kids is arguably more effective than workshops led by adults.

Cyber bullying, the alarming, twisted practice of intimidation delivered via the internet, has rapidly overtaken the physical, playground violence Khoury suffered.

Playwright Rachel Cook tapped into Facebook's worst features: anonymity that protects bullies from discovery and a "status" language that encourages labels.

"We should chat her," replaced the school yard, "Let's get her!" And a bully's cruelest jibes went viral with one keystroke.

If the arts in education movement needs a fresh argument for why drama, music and visual arts should remain a part of K-12 public schools, a group of Miramonte High School (MHS) theater students has a resounding reason: Art fights bullies, and wins.

On a sunny day in January, forty-five 6th grade students sat in the multi-use room at Orinda Intermediate School (OIS); mesmerized, as MHS students performed short plays about teenage cliques, teasing and cyber bullying.

Heather Cousins, MHS drama teacher, said the OIS Theater-In-Education program, developed in collaboration with the school's Character Ed Committee in 2001, has been a success.

"It makes sense, educationally, artistically, and financially," she said.

Cousins used the opportunity to assign the task of writing and directing the plays to her advanced drama students. Most of the playwrights and directors found source material in their personal history.

"It makes it better because it's a lot more honest to play a part you

Cook's play hit all the right notes with its audience, who, like the groups before them, were completely absorbed by the drama.

"If schools hire professional groups to come in and do these events-and there are many good quality groups-it is expensive. Our cost to the school is nothing," Cousins noted.

"And, we spread the word about the drama department at Miramonte and give these kids role models," she added.

It's a win-win in the bullying world, where the score is rarely even.

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