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'Bully' will break your heart

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

For Lent this year, my resolution was to look into the face of every person I encountered who was begging. If I could, I gave that person something, greeted them and said "good morning" or "good afternoon." And I intentionally thought: "This is some mother's sweet baby." It makes it so much easier to love that person when you think of them as innocent and vulnerable children who gave joy to their parents before life set in.

All I could think of when I was watching the documentary "Bully" was that each of these bullied kids is some mother's sweet baby.

I went to see "Bully," which was filmed in Georgia, Iowa, Texas, Mississippi and Oklahoma during the 2009-2010 school year, thinking I would see a lot of physical violence and hear a lot of bad language. After all, the MPAA gave the film a controversial "R" rating because of "strong violence, sexual content, drug use and language - all involving teens." The film's distributor, The Weinstein Company, decided to release the film without a rating, leaving it up to theaters -- hence, parents -- to decide to screen it or not.

For the life of me, I don't recall seeing or hearing any "sexual content, drug use or strong violence." The few "f-words" came toward the beginning of the film, and then no more. Verbal threats from one bully were graphic and cruel, but explicit visuals? No. One teen girl is a lesbian; is this the "sexual content" to which the MPAA refers? We see her with her girlfriend and other friends, but they are just hanging out. Why the MPAA says there is "drug use" is beyond me; I did not see any.

Instead of being immersed in a socio-cultural cesspool, as the above inaccurate content analysis seemed to indicate, I was pulled into contemplating the face of David Long as he told the story of his son Tyler's suicide at the age of 11 because of relentless bullying.

What is bullying in the film? Unprovoked pushing, pulling, name-calling, choking, pushing kids' heads into lockers and walls, stabbing with pencils, sitting on kids, taking their stuff, threats of physical violence and telling targets they are useless and "go hang yourself."

Kids who are different, like Alex, who was born premature at 26 weeks and has pronounced features and doesn't walk straight, but who is bright and articulate.

"People think I am not normal," he says.

He tells his parents about the bullies, but they think he needs to stand up for himself. Alex is so used to the bullies that he excuses them. But the bullying he endures on the bus so concerned the filmmakers they showed their footage to his parents and school officials.

When Alex tells the principal that she didn't do anything to stop the bullying, she says: "How do you know I didn't do anything? Did he ever sit on your head on the bus again?"

"No," says Alex quietly. "He did other stuff."

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A 14-year-old girl in Mississippi, Ja'Maya, was so tormented on the school bus that she takes her mother's handgun to school. On the way home, the bullies start in on her, and she pulls out the gun. She is arrested on more than 20 counts of kidnapping and other charges. She is placed in a hospital for psychological evaluation, and after a few months is allowed home, and all charges were dropped.

Kelby lives in Oklahoma. When she comes out as a lesbian while in high school, she and her family are no longer welcome at church and she is shunned at school. Her father admits that his daughter made him completely rethink his life and beliefs. Kelby's parents offer to move the family to a bigger place where she can just blend in. But Kelby wants to make a difference, to promote tolerance. In the end, it becomes impossible for her.

The patronizing and clueless way officials treat parents and their lack of will and/or ability to acknowledge or deal decisively with bullies is alarming. The isolation and loneliness of these children and the merciless bullying by other children will break your heart.

I spent some time thinking back to how I acted in school. I got in a fight once in eighth grade with a girl -- we even set the time and place. And it happened to be on the way to a Girl Scout meeting. I do not remember her name or what we fought about. It did not amount to much. I do remember gossiping in the sixth grade that led to another girl's embarrassment. I have always regretted that.

Bullying happens in religious life, too. I know I am not blameless in the fragile-strong dynamic of unrelated women living together for the sake of mission in Christ.

"Bully" is a film that can make you think and lead to change and action. Two of the fathers in the film become advocates against bullying by informing students, teachers, parents and the public in general about the lives of their children and the consequences of bullying.

Alex's dad says he and his wife are "nobody," but if some politician's son was being bullied, officials would find a way to stop it. But the two decide that they are "somebody" and become advocates against

bullying.

Some film critics don't think the film goes far enough with solutions. I disagree. If every parent will only teach their child empathy, to walk in the shoes of another, as one father repeats throughout the film, it will go a long way to stop bullying.

"Bully" is a film every kid capable of bullying and being bullied should see; it's a film that parents, educators, administrators, law enforcement and child care providers need to see.

How many more kids will die because we think we cannot do anything or that there is no problem, or that it's "a very complex issue"?

On Sunday, NBC's "Dateline" aired an update on the 2010 suicide of Phoebe Prince. Although one reporter feels that because Phoebe Prince had a history of depression and was taking medication and might not have taken her life because of relentless bullying, ask Sharon Velasquez.

Velasquez is one of the teens accused of being part of a concerted campaign to bully the high school student who is now on probation until she turns 19. She did not graduate with her class, but obtained a GED. And she is haunted by the part she played in bullying the new girl in school and her subsequent death.

Let's save our kids from lifelong regret. Bullying is an epidemic that character education can address. Catechesis and religious education are not enough.

These kids, tormentors and victims are some mother's sweet babies; how can we do nothing?

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