

# Review “Bully” Is Worth Fighting For



Alex Libby is picked on relentlessly in “Bully.” (Courtesy The Weinstein Company)

Near the end of the documentary “Bully,” a school principal sits down with the parents of a constantly picked on pre-teen. The mother implores the principal to stop the bullies from attacking her son, Alex Libby, on the bus “I’ve been on those buses,” the principal says in return. “They’re just as good as gold.”

By the time the scene rolls around in the 72-minute movie, you’ll want to yell at the screen, “Wake up!” That’s undoubtedly director Lee Hirsch’s point with “Bully.” Inaction perpetuates the problem of bullying.

In a montage of violence against Alex leading up the parent-principal meeting, we see the boy known as “Fish Face,” punched, slapped, cursed at and stabbed with pencils. His head bounces off the back of a bus seat and it stings for him and us.

Alex, earlier in the movie, is confronted by his mother. Alex has played down the bullying he’s incurred. She tries to tell him that the bullies are not his friends.

Alex responds: “If you say these people aren’t my friends, then what friends do I have?” It’s the kind of sad response that will bring you to tears. It’s not the first or last time during the film when that will happen.

Some adults remember their school days more fondly than others. Some who don’t were the objects of scorn, exclusion, taunts and violence. Schools can be a cruel place for the awkward or different. “Bully” shows how bad it can for those who don’t have anyone to fight for them.

The principal in that scene with Alex’s parents is well-meaning. You see her throughout the film try to defend those who can’t do it for themselves. But, she also buries her head in the sand several times, making the bullied feel as responsible as the bullies. She tries to mend fences and not get to the root of the problem.

While Alex’s story tends to get the most attention, there are other teens who get time to talk about their experiences. While it’s hard not to feel bad for them as they struggle with the pain, you never really see their encounters. You follow the crusade of a husband and wife mourning the suicide of their son, Tyler Long. His tragic decision will be the catalyst for their calls to end bullying locally and nationally.

In the case of one teen who has come out as a lesbian, we just see her wander the town with her friends, but never see much else. Perhaps the filmmakers weren’t allowed the access to her surroundings the way they are with Libby. She’s clearly troubled and out of place in her rural settings.

Libby's encounters are so painful that perhaps that's enough teen-on-teen violence for one film. We see what happens when other teens bullied snap into action. The ramifications of one girl's decisions are awful to sit through, if only because you realize how young she is to be in such a mess. When you see a girl wave a gun on a bus, threatening her bullies, you wonder how it ever came to this in the first place.

It's haunting.

Earlier this week, I posted some reflections on whether "Bully" would really make a difference in our society.

For me, "Bully" is one of the best films of the year and certainly one of the most important. [The film's producers fought the Motion Picture Association of America over its R rating and has since earned a PG-13 with some minor tweaks.](#) The cursing that takes place in Bully, while dark and profane, is minimal and the perfect illustration of what is said on playgrounds and buses every day in America.

De-humanizing bullying happens every day and if we turn a blind eye to the reality of the situation, as the principal does, real cultural change is not going to happen. "Bully" takes us places we don't want to go, but that's the mark of a truly great documentary.

Children and teens should be able to handle "Bully" in the theaters. Many see and experience what happens in the film every day. Now, they can know they're not alone and that someone's on their side. "Bully" shows it's time to fight back.

Make sure you also read the Catholic News Service review of "Bully" as well.