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BBYO embraces anti-bullying doc, taking message to Jewish teens

Debra Rubin

WASHINGTON – Emotional. Raw. Frustrating.

That's how Oz Fishman describes his reaction to *Bully*, a documentary that follows five students who face bullying daily. The movie also focusses on two victims of bullying who killed themselves.

"I think every single person who wants to be a member of any community should see this film," Fishman said.

As international co-president of the Jewish youth group BBYO, Fishman has been in a position to help make *Bully* available to Jewish teens and their parents throughout the country.

BBYO has partnered with The Bully Project, which made the documentary, to bring the film to Jewish teens. *Bully* opened in limited release on March 30; two days later, the youth organization held the first two of 15 private screenings that it will host nationwide.

The much-discussed film has fuelled the national conversation over how to prevent bullying. The Bully Project aims to have a million teens see the movie and sign a pledge promising to take a stand against bullying – "stick up for others who might be in need of my help" – and be role models by not spreading hateful rumors and not ignoring those who do.

Bully filmmaker Lee Hirsch is delighted by BBYO's participation.

"BBYO has rallied around this film in a way that has absolutely been inspirational to me as a filmmaker and as a Jew," Hirsch said.



A still from the documentary "Bully" -- BBYO has teamed with The Bully Project to bring the film to Jewish teens. (The Bully Project)

"It's been an extraordinary thing to witness."

The youth organization's February convention in Atlanta included a preview of the film. BBYO members also were trained as facilitators for discussions that follow the screenings.

The discussions use a Jewish study guide developed by BBYO. The guide provides a Jewish foundation for the teens to talk about the film and about bullying, according to Rabbi David Kessel, BBYO's chief program officer. It is used as a supplement to *BULLY: Fostering Empathy and Action in Schools*, the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum created for The Bully Project.

The BBYO curriculum includes distributing cards that contain such Jewish values as *pikuach nefesh*, or saving a life; *hochai'ach tochee'ach*, you shall rebuke; *halbanat panim*, avoiding public humiliation; and *ona'at d'varim*, laws aimed at avoiding verbal humiliation.

"When you've seen a movie like *Bully*, it's personal in a way because all of these teenagers have seen bullying in real life, know a friend who's been bullied," Kessel said. "The values give them a Jewish way to talk about it."

Fishman, 18, was particularly struck by remarks in the film from the father of one of the suicide victims.

"The father said, 'We're nobody; we're just some random people. Had this happened to a son of a politician, it would have been on the front pages everywhere,'" Fishman recalled. "It is shocking to me that anybody would ever feel so worthless and meaningless that their child, having been bullied to a point of suicide, wasn't worthy of the world's attention."

As Jews, he said, "it's part of our values to do our best to stop [bullying]. That's how we build a better world."

BBYO officials say the film dovetails with the group's *Stand Up for Each Other Campaign for Respect and Inclusion*, a project that

began a year-and-a-half ago and is "designed to raise sensitivity, to teach teens to create open communities," Kessel said.

"The concept behind The Bully Project is that it takes a movement, it takes a village" to change attitudes, "and you can be that change," said Estee Portnoy, who chairs BBYO's international board of directors. "That really aligned" with BBYO's *Stand Up* campaign.

As part of the *Stand Up* project, BBYO joined with Keshet, a gay and lesbian Jewish group, to get signatures for Keshet's *Do Not Stand Idly By: A Jewish Community Pledge to Save Lives*, which commits signers to speak against homophobic bullying and harassment.

The youth group also put together "a resource guide with a number of different model programs that you could run at a convention, shabbaton, leadership event," Kessel said.

The rabbi said he already sees a culture shift. People are more aware, for example, of the kind of language they use.

"We looked at terms like 'That's so gay,'" Kessel said, and tried to make people understand that it's a pejorative.

"We haven't solved the problem," he said, "but we've taken a major step forward."

For Adam Greenburg, 18, who was bullied as a child – for being "the only Jew for miles" and for being overweight – BBYO already is a safe haven.

"We don't put up with bullying at all," said Greenburg of Redondo Beach, Calif. "Jews are really big on doing the right thing and I think with the *Stand Up* cause, it gives us the opportunity to do the right thing."

– JTA

Gilad Shalit released from the military

JERUSALEM – Former captive Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was released from the Israel Defence Forces.

Shalit was officially released, at the rank of sergeant-major, last Wednesday, six months after he was freed from Hamas captivity in Gaza.

He signed his release forms at his northern Israel home in Mitzpe Hila in lieu of going to an IDF induction centre as part of an expedited administrative procedure, according to reports.

Shalit was held in Gaza for more than five years after being captured by Hamas in a cross-border raid in June 2006. He was released last October as part of a swap between Israel and Hamas in which nearly 500 Palestinian prisoners being held in Israeli jails were released at the time of his release, and another 550 in December.

Following his release from Hamas captivity, Shalit was classified as a disabled veteran. He received medical and psychological treatment from the military, and will continue to do so through the Ministry of Defence's Disabled Rehabilitation Division, *The Jerusalem Post* reported.



GILAD SHALIT: Out of IDF

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