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Film project helps teens fight bullying

Program helps foster creative coping skills for adolescents with facial malformations

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Acting in front of a green screen, Kyle McKenzie tries to imagine monster clones coming at him.

The clones are to be added to the video later. His job now is to ignore the outlandishness of standing in a near-empty room pretending to fight them off.

"It's a bit like real life," he says.

To escape the impulse to laugh, he enters an internal world and grounds himself, he says, just as he must connect with his deeper self when confronted by somebody making fun of his face.

"If somebody says something, you can't just start a fight," says McKenzie, 17, a Grade 12 student at Danforth Collegiate and Technical Institute. "You have to work it out (internally) with a sense of dignity and a sense of, `I don't care what you say about me, so say it all you want – you're not going to hurt me.'"

McKenzie was among the 14 teenagers participating in a one-day filmmaking workshop yesterday, creating video essays about bullying. All participants were born with a facial or cranial malformation of the type that can sometimes attract stares and occasionally harassment.

In work rooms at Bloorview Kids Rehab, a children's rehabilitation hospital off Bayview Ave. north of Eglinton Ave., they split into three groups.

One formed a documentary crew under the direction of independent filmmaker Karen Shopsowitz. A second fashioned small animals from clay, preparing to make an animated film with two staff members from the National Film Board.

The third group fought phantom clones, McKenzie confident in front of the camera and leading the action.

"Until about the age of 12, children come to our programs with their parents," Bloorview social worker Melissa Joseph said in an interview. "After that, we start to lose them.

"We wanted to create a program that would interest them and somebody said, `What about

film?'"

The workshop brings the teenagers together, reassures them that they are not alone with their differences, and lets them create their own scripts on how to deal with getting stared at or teased, she said. The Hospital for Sick Children co-sponsors the project.

"It's not like a boring thing where we're being talked to," McKenzie said of the approach. "The bullying theme just sort of comes into the mix. It's sort of helping you (with coping strategies) without you realizing that, oh, it's helping."

McKenzie was born with a cleft lip and palate, his lip and upper gums split into three parts. Within a couple of months, surgeons did a brilliant job of bringing the sections together. Other surgeries and speech therapy followed, and an operation is scheduled this summer that involves breaking his jaw and realigning the front teeth.

But McKenzie seems to have grown up with a healthy sense of himself. "I consider myself to be as normal as can be while still being different," he said. "Personally, I'm kind of proud of my difference."

Bullying has never been a big problem, he said. He chooses his friends well and they support each other.