

## Taking action against bullies

Teens in Project AWARE make a movie partly based on real stories about harassment.

*By DEBORAH SAYER, News Assistant October 31, 2007*  
Portland Press Herald



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Project AWARE members and Thornton Academy theater teacher David Hanright act out a scene for a movie about bullying, "Untold Stories," on Saturday at Saco Middle School.

## ABOUT THE GROUP

PROJECT AWARE, founded in 2003, helps middle and senior high students identify and put voice to concerns affecting their generation.

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Fresh on the heels of "Falling," a locally produced movie detailing prescription drug abuse among teens, the youth advocate group Project AWARE Inc., has embarked on "Untold Stories," a movie dealing with bullying and harassment.

The Saco-based, student-led organization recently wrapped filming after a three-day shoot at locales including Saco Middle School and two private residences.

The script is loosely based on experiences faced by some team members. It was written, produced and directed by teenagers, who also provided most of the action.

According to Project AWARE co-founder and coordinator Carl Lakari, the team opted to tackle the subject of bullying after hearing the stories of two fellow members.

"They really wanted to make a difference through the movie," said Lakari. "It details the stories of two young people being harassed at the middle school level. It's a combination of true stories with added elements."

Lakari said the program is intended to complement the state's bullying and harassment prevention curriculum, spearheaded locally by Crossroads Youth Center director and author Deb Landry.

"It helps that process by raising awareness in the community," said Lakari. "It starts a dialogue for change rather than merely putting requirements out there to be met. This story makes it real."

One story deals with the harassment of 15-year-old Alyssa McCourt, a Thornton Academy freshman who faced bullying in junior high before moving to Saco.

McCourt said her experience began as a miscommunication among friends but quickly descended into accusations of racism and rumors about her sexual orientation.

Embarrassed, McCourt felt she had nowhere to turn. So she turned her rage inward, putting on a brave outer face but privately battling depression and thoughts of suicide at home.

McCourt found an advocate in Lakari and Project AWARE, connecting with them at a youth empowerment event.

These days, she aims to offer similar support to her peers, spreading the message that bullying isn't normal and those dealing with it have a place they can go to talk about it. McCourt also plays one of the lead characters in the new movie.

The 21-minute production was shot by Video Creations of Kennebunk, who also filmed "Falling."

The DVD is expected to be released in March 2008.

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