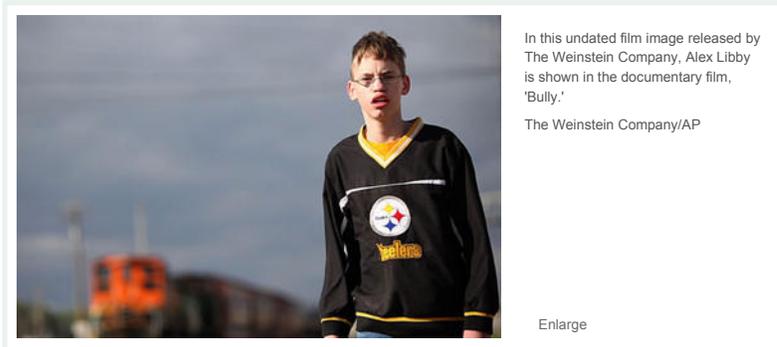


'Bully' movie to be released 'unrated.' Will that allow more kids to see it?

Because of crude language, the award-winning movie 'Bully' was initially given an 'R' rating. But the documentary is being released 'unrated' in the hopes of reaching its target audience.

By Daniel B. Wood, Staff Writer / March 27, 2012

LOS ANGELES



The award-winning documentary "Bully" will open in theaters Friday as "unrated."

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The movie, which tells the stories of five children and their families, had been given an "R" rating by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). The rating was publicly challenged by Katy Butler, a bullied high school student from Michigan, who launched an online petition at Change.org that garnered the signatures of 500,000 people.

But the MPAA refused to change the rating, unless several bursts of crude language were removed. Katy argued that such a rating was likely to prevent viewing by the very people she says need to see it most.

In the end, the film's distributor, the Weinstein Co., decided to release the film without a rating – an option open to any producer or director.

To have taken out the offensive language, say Katy and some bullying experts, would have sanitized an activity that needs to be held up for what it is.

"If you are going to tell a story about slavery, you are going to mention lynchings. If you talk about the Holocaust, you have to see the reality of the death camps," says Charles Williams, director of the Center for the Prevention of School-Aged Violence at Drexel University in Philadelphia. "There aren't too many polite bullies. This is an example of where you leave in the reality so it can have its intended effect. Otherwise you wash it out and have an inauthentic film."

The MPAA responds that it respects the film, but is merely doing what the rating system is designed to do – let parents and others know about the content of the film.

"It is not uncommon for filmmakers to choose to release a film unrated and it does not prevent the company from resubmitting the film in a modified version to be rated again at a future date," said the MPAA in a statement. "The MPAA believes this film raises an

important conversation on the subject of bullying in our nation's schools and respects the right of The Weinstein Company to choose to release this film unrated."

Young people can still see the movie with their parents or at any school that wants to mount a showing, some point out.

Gordon Coonfield, professor of communications at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, sees it differently. The MPAA is in denial about the role its rating system plays in the economics of the entertainment industry, he says.

"Many of the larger theater chains, who are responsible for providing access to millions of Americans, will not exhibit films that are unrated by the MPAA," he says via e-mail. "The film will continue to face this de facto censorship in its post-theatrical life, too."

Some school districts, Professor Coonfield adds, have policies preventing an unrated, let alone an R-rated, film being publicly exhibited.

Yet AMC Theatres, one of the largest movie theater chains, isn't taking this position. Gerry Lopez, CEO of the chain, signed the Change.org petition. He said previously in a statement that he will make sure "Bully" plays at AMC Theatres, even as an "unrated" movie.

Some have other issues with the film.

"The bigger problem I have with the movie is that it is more of the same," according to Corinne Gregory, who wrote "Breaking the Bully Culture" and tours the country giving talks at schools. "We need to stop focusing purely on the epidemic and tragedy and start looking at solutions," she says via e-mail.

Bringing parents along might be a good thing, she adds.

"[T]he rating only applies to kids seeing the movie on their own. I really don't believe that too many sub-17-year-olds are going to choose 'Bully' over, say, 'The Hunger Games' or other popular fare," she writes. "In most cases, it'll be the parents who want their kids to see it ... and then they will take the kids."

Some are renewing calls for a revamp of the rating system.

"Maybe our children know more than we think and are much more sophisticated than we give them credit for," says Coonfield of Villanova. "And maybe it is time ... to give way to a more sophisticated ratings system."

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