

Meet Upstander Francesca Murdoch

2016 Community Access New York Mental Health Film Festival's Young Filmmaker's Competition winner shares about how her winning film tackled bullying.



Still from "Intervention"

What are you most excited about doing in this next school year?

At the moment, I'm most excited about rehearsals for our school's fall play, which is *Is He Dead* by Mark Twain, and for my language classes to start again. I'm studying Latin and French at school, but I've also grown up bilingually – English and German.

Where do you go for cinematic inspiration?

I get a lot of my inspiration from the courses I take, in school and outside of it. A major influence on me was a film camp with the instructor J.P. Morgan at SUNY Purchase, as well as Jonathan Bucari's film club at the Lighthouse Theater in Armonk, and I also draw a lot from the acting classes I take at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute at the moment.

Share a little summary about your winning film short "Intervention" from last year and what inspired you to create it. [See the trailer and follow the short film's progress here.](#)

The film is about the relationship between a teenage girl and a boy her age who struggles with domestic abuse, mental health issues, and social isolation. James, the male main character in

"Intervention", deals with an unbearable situation at home, is an outsider in school and has nobody to turn to until he meets Sarah, but even she doesn't manage to save him. The idea actually came about as part of the film club I attended at The Lighthouse Theater, where I came up with the story with a group of kids my age. We were asked to write a screenplay to produce into a film, and although "Intervention" was ultimately passed over in favor of a more lighthearted screenplay, the club's instructor, Jonathan Bucari, encouraged me to make the film after the club ended.

"Intervention" shares the importance of standing up and standing out when you see someone facing challenges to their mental health. How do you feel this is also important when you see bullying?

It's important in both cases because people dealing with bullying and mental health issues can start to feel alone and as though they have nowhere to turn to. Knowing that there is someone out there who cares about what you're going through, being able to talk about it and not having to be ashamed of it can make the situation feel so much more livable and so much more hopeful.

Have you ever experienced or witnessed people being bullied? Can you share a little about that?

A close friend of mine has struggled pretty badly with bullying in the past, and it has been incredibly hard on him. It is unbelievable how horrible people can be, and I hate the idea that anyone has to go through what he did.

What resources do you think a person should have available to respond to bullying?

As a teenager myself, I think it is important to have someone you can trust and count on for support in your life, whether it's someone your age, a parent, a teacher, or a guidance counselor. If you feel like your struggle is being ignored or if you have to stand up against bullies on your own, it's easy to feel helpless, overwhelmed, and desperate.

What do you think are the impacts of a person standing out in a community that is often silent? What about the effect or challenges it has on the person standing out?

Even if it is hard, and sometimes also scary, for the person standing out at first, their involvement can make it easier for others to step forward and to also stand up for others. Having someone stand up for you can make a world of difference if you're dealing with bullying and mental health issues alike.

How do you think your film and this competition help to inspire others to speak out rather than be bystanders around issues of mental health or when they see bullying?

The Community Access New York Mental Health Film Festival's Young Filmmaker's Competition is so incredibly important because it gives kids and teenagers like me a platform and a place to be heard. I think at this age it's easy to feel like standing up or trying to share our point of view is impossible or pointless, but the competition, as well as my film, will hopefully show that teenagers have a voice that can be heard after all.

How do you think young people can be more involved in their own schools to encourage discussion of mental health?

There's a group at my school called LETS (Let's End The Stigma), which does outreach and raises awareness. Involvement in clubs like that, as well as standing by people struggling with mental illness and making sure they know they're not

alone, are incredibly important ways of getting involved at school. For many, there's still a stigma attached to admitting that you are struggling with mental health issues, that's something we need to change. If people feel they can talk about their struggles, they may be more likely to find help.



What projects are you working on now?

I've been focusing on theater and on acting a lot more recently, but I've still got a few short film scripts on the go, and I'd love to write a feature film, too.

Born in New York City, Francesca has always had a strong interest in the arts. Shortly before her 13th birthday, Francesca wrote and directed her short film, "Intervention," which deals with a teenager suffering from anxiety and depression, and which has screened at a number of festivals across the U.S. Since then, Francesca won awards as the first freshman ever in Rye High School's Zephyr Writing Competition for her poem and her short story, and she has learned to speak French and Hungarian. She continues to support causes that make the world a better place.