Colorado Shakespeare Festival uses 'Twelfth Night' to talk about anti-bullying

By Magdalena Wegrzyn Longmont Times-Call

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Students Katrina Scears, Diana Gomez, and Hai-lea Eads, from left, participate in a behavior exercise during an anti-bullying program at Imagine Charter School, 5753 Twilight Ave., on Friday. (LEWIS GEYER)

FIRESTONE -- Actors from the Colorado Shakespeare Festival are using the Bard's timeless words to illustrate to students the perils of bullying.

A troupe of three professional actors is touring 32 elementary, middle and high schools on the Front Range, including several in the St. Vrain Valley School District, and performing a 50-minute version of William Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" before leading bully-prevention workshops.
"We chose this play in part because it deals with class and status, and a lot of the characters mistreat each other," actor Benaiah Anderson said before performing the play for fifth- through eighth-graders Sept. 23 at Imagine Charter School at Firestone.

Actors introduce Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" while his fellow cast members Crystan Verdon Eisele, center, and Joan Dieter joke behind his back at Imagine Charter School, 5753 Twilight Ave., on Friday. ( LEWIS GEYER )

comedy centers on several cases of mistaken identity. One of the plot points involves a few characters conspiring to make a servant named Malvolio believe the countess he serves is in love with him, leading him to make a fool of himself in front of her.

In an interactive workshop after the production, small groups of students re-enacted a scene from the play in which the characters devise their plan.

"You can step in at those moments," Anderson told a group of seventh- and eighth-graders. "You can go to someone who can help the situation."

About 28 percent of SVVSD high school students reported in November 2009 that they had been harassed in the past year, according to the Boulder County Youth Risk Behavior Survey from 2009. About 15 percent said they had been bullied online or through text messaging in the past year.

While actors from the Colorado Shakespeare Festival routinely tour schools to promote productions, this marks the first time the Boulder-based troupe has collaborated with the University of Colorado at Boulder's Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence to provide an anti-bullying program.

"Schools have very little money for arts programs, and we were thinking how can we make ourselves more necessary? How can we serve students and teachers?" said Colorado Shakespeare Festival literary manager Amanda Giguere.

The program, which launched last week, will continue through Oct. 21. It is funded through an $8,000 grant from CU's Office for University Outreach and a $2,000 grant from the university's Fund for Arts and Sciences Community. The bulk of the grant money goes toward subsidizing the cost of the program -- each school pays $550 for the play and workshops -- for low-income schools.

The Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, which collects and analyzes research on violence, has an initiative called Safe Communities, Safe Schools, which provides schools access to anonymous online surveys to measure school safety. As part of the center's partnership with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival, staff gave
actors a crash course in bullying and the cycle of violence, said research assistant Susan Lineberry. Actors also learn about Safe2Tell, a 24-hour hotline where anonymous callers can report threats and safety concerns.

After the workshop, seventh-grader Meah Ricciardiello said she hopes the program showed her peers the severity of bullying. The 12-year-old said she was bullied before coming to Imagine Charter School because of her crooked front teeth.

"For a long time, I never opened my mouth," said Ricciardiello, who now wears braces.

Ricciardiello said she now intervenes when she spots bullying and wants her classmates to do the same.

"This sort of thing might help give a boost to help people recognize (bullying) and give them a reason to help," she said.

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