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'Ugly Ducklings' tackles controversial subjects

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WATERVILLE -- Imagine being a gay teenager trying to come to terms with your sexuality in a community decidedly homophobic.

That is the premise of the play "Ugly Ducklings," a drama produced by two youth advocate groups from Waterville as a way to promote awareness and understanding of an issue that often leads to harassment and sometimes results in suicide.

"If we can facilitate communities and people who care about kids into starting conversations that will prevent (these kids) from feeling so desperate that they kill themselves, or try to kill themselves, then we are happy to do that," said Karen Heck, co-founder of Hardy Girls/Hardy Women.

Heck's organization and Greater Waterville Communities for Children & Youth have teamed to co-produce "Ugly Ducklings," an original play written by Portland playwright Carolyn Gage.

The production will have its debut Sept. 15 at Colby College's Strider Theater.

A Sept. 23 performance at Camden Opera House in Camden also is planned.

Along with the play, the "Ugly Duckling" project involves an educational documentary film focused on the behind-the-scenes efforts to make the drama a reality.

That film will be coupled with a package of related literature, dubbed a community action kit, aimed at encouraging people, both adults and youth, to talk about the issue.

The intent is to distribute the film and kit to families, schools and communities throughout Maine and across the country.

Lauren Sterling of Communities for Children said major financial support from the Maine Community Foundation and the Bingham Program already has provided much of the funding necessary to turn the project into a national campaign.

Heck, Sterling and Lyn Mikel Brown, a Colby College professor and another co-founder of Hardy Girls/Hardy Women, are the three most directly responsible for the initiative.

They were motivated in large part by Maine's alarmingly high rate of teenage suicide. That rate was 50 percent higher than the national level and 72 percent higher than New England's during a two-year period beginning in 1999, according to Communities for Children.

A 2003 survey gauging risky behavior by Maine youth, meanwhile, revealed that 12 percent of boys and 9 percent of girls in high school reported being attacked -- either verbally or physically -- because of their sexual orientation.

"It is very high," Brown said. "It is so high that when you talk to kids they talk about it like it is just typical behavior, but for the kids struggling with those issues, it is not typical at all; it is frightening."

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