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Teen raises awareness about mental health through prestigious local film festival

by John Muller and Kim Pestalozzi   **August 4, 2017**

NEW YORK, NY- "I think it really started with the way my parents raised me," Francesca Murdoch said. "I was told a lot of stories and always encouraged to follow my sort of artsy tendencies when I was little."

Art imitates life for 16-year-old Murdoch.

"If I go out looking for inspiration, I tend not to find it," she smiled. "It tends to sneak up on me and it's usually the little things."

From the sketchbook to the stage to the screen, this high school junior thrives on creativity. "Me as a person, [I'm] a little bit eccentric and a little bit prone to letting my imagination run a bit wild," she described. "When I was eight I started acting and got interested in what happened behind the scenes."

So when she was only 12, she and some classmates developed an idea for a movie focused on a topic most people don't like to talk about.

"It's about a teen boy who's dealing with domestic abuse, depression, social isolation, with bullying and about his relationship with a girl his age who tries to save him," she explained. "Although in the end it turns out to be a bit too late."

A tragedy no one should experience but a reality that happens all too often. Suicide is now the second leading cause of death among teenagers.

"I came very close to losing someone I cared a lot about," Murdoch remembered.

Her short film took home a top prize at last year's New York City Mental Health Film Festival.

 "We're looking for films that inspire hope, fight stigma and talk about social justice," said Carla Rabinowitz, Community Access advocacy coordinator.

The film festival, the longest running and largest of its kind, was launched in 2005 by Community Access. The nonprofit is an all encompassing resource for people struggling with various illnesses.

"A lot of films have been submitted so far, we have 200 films but we're looking for more," Rabinowitz added. "The deadline is Aug. 30th."

One category is The Changing Minds Young Filmmaker competition, which Francesca won.

"I think the film festival is incredibly important because it gives people my age a chance to be heard and a chance to try and change the world," Murdoch said.

And in her mind the best way to do good is by being good.

"My hope for me as a person is to be someone who makes other people happy to be around," she smiled.