

NEWS

Aussie Film Festival Focuses on Bullying of New York City Kids



BY CYNTHIA FAGEN IN SYDNEY ON MAY 29, 2019



Nobody should have to put up with the schoolyard bully, especially kids with disabilities. Eleven years ago, Martin Wren rolled up his sleeves to try and tackle the rampant problem in Australian schools.

Wren was already running NOVA Employment, a Sydney-based disability employment service provider, when he decided to attack the bullying problem at its core – in schools.

But Wren had to come up with an innovative way to capture students' attention.

Then it came to him. Movies. Who doesn't like to watch movies? If people with disabilities could make movies about themselves or about others that challenged people's perceptions, it just might make others more aware.



Martin
Wren

Wren created the Focus on Ability International Short Film Festival or (*Focus*) — five-minute docs produced by a person with disabilities or about a person with disabilities — all shot on smart phones.

Teachers have told Wren, "The boys are no longer the 'weirdo' it's hey, how did you do that' and 'this is cool," he said.

What started in a handful of Australia's 9500 high schools with a modest 12 entries and a pool of \$1000 in prizes, is now a worldwide hit. This past year, there were 247 short films entries from 29 countries and \$160,000 in prizes sponsored by dozens of Australian businesses.



With the success of FOCUS, Wren now wants to take his show on the road to an even bigger audience — New York City's public high school.

It's a daunting challenge. Critics have claimed that despite the city's Board of Education's \$47 million budget for mental health support and security for its 1.1 million students, it doesn't seem to be packing enough of a punch to eradicate the systemic problem.

Bullying is at an all-time high in all five boroughs of New York City. More than 8 in 10 — sixth- through 12th-graders — report a bullying incident at school. In one of New York City's worst cases, a senior who claimed he had been bullied in school went berserk and allegedly stabbed to death a classmate in a Bronx high school. It sent shockwaves through the city.

Wren knows it's a formidable assignment. He's already taken the first step, registering his non-profit in the US.

"Opportunity — smart students, digital literacy, cultural similarities, cost of promotion, previous interest and experiences — collectively, these qualities make targeting America a logical progression," Wren explained.

Checkout some of the award-winning Australian focus films here:

- [Keep Dancing](#)
- [I Am Steve](#)
- [Meg: A Teenager at School](#)
- [I'm Marcus](#)

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