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## His DVD message to bullies: chill out

BY WARREN WOODBERRY JR.  
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Jeff Gomez was born a "forceps baby," his features slightly contorted by partial facial paralysis.

As a boy growing up in Flushing, he was teased by other kids about his features, and tormented at Intermediate School 237 by bullies who would cruelly demand: "Why is your mouth twisted?"

But the harsh words did not dent Gomez's self-esteem. He turned the tables on bullies by showing admiration for their cool clothes and bikes. The boy with the different look soon gained their trust, friendship and, ultimately, their respect.

Today Gomez, 42, is president and CEO of Starlight Runner Entertainment Inc. and has produced a DVD titled: "Don't Laugh at Me" to help beleaguered youths stand up to bullies. He filmed it at IS 237, the Rachel L. Carson school - the same place where bullies once harassed him.

"What I'd like them to do is understand the values of young people and not to allow the threat of physical or emotional violence to stop them," he explained.

Physical appearance, learning disabilities, personal possessions and nationality are among reasons bullies tend to pick on kids, said Gomez, who added that each day thousands of kids avoid bullies by staying home from school - a practice that leads to low self-esteem and poor grades.

The lessons "Don't Laugh at Me" teach youth are that all kids are different, and that they must learn to respect one another for their differences, the producer said.

The five-minute DVD features a hip-hop music video starring 14-year-old Houston rapper Baby Jay, who tells bullies to chill out.

"He's saying we have things in common. One day we will have perfect wings, which means we're all going to the same place. Let's chill," said Gomez, who went on to graduate from Flushing's John Bowne High School.



**Baby Jay (seated) and Jeff Gomez during filming of DVD.**

"Don't Laugh at Me" will be shown to students at IS 237 in April, and after that will be distributed to middle schools and high schools nationwide.

It is part of an initiative now in metropolitan-area public schools called Operation Respect, and is accompanied by a 40-minute lesson plan offering teachers and professionals methods to help curb bullying.

IS 237 Principal Joseph Cantara said that these days, when an incident occurs between students, instead of sending one to detention and sympathizing with the other, both are encouraged to talk out their issues and to take part in activities, such as a community cleanup project.

"If you're not preaching to kids about what to do and what not to do, you're giving them an opportunity to work together and share together, and you lessen the friction of bullying," Cantara said.

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