

The Berkshire Eagle

'Virtually Me' puts to song the worrisome aspects of a pervasive e-culture

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PITTSFIELD -- Lindsay is a very popular teenager at Willard Fillmore High School -- or "WiFi High" to the technologically savvy student body.

However, Lindsay's reputation is nearly ruined by close friends Zeke, Jasper and Chloe, after they post an unflattering picture of her on the Internet "just for fun." When Lindsay disappears after receiving hateful text messages about the photo, the trio fear their techno-prank may cause Lindsay to harm herself.

The three friends -- now using their cell phones responsibly -- rely on texting dozens of other people to find the distraught teenager hiding in a shopping mall and apologize for being "cyber-bullies."

While the students at "WiFi High" are fictional characters in "Virtually Me," the musical's story line about the real dangers of cyber-bullying was delivered on Monday to more than 700 Pittsfield-area school children at the Colonial Theatre.

The Colonial's Performing Arts for Schools sponsored the educational show staged by the New York-based Matt Murphy Productions. "Virtually Me" has been well received by students since the road show debuted a month ago, according to cast

members.

"The kids seem to really understand the message," said Ashley Tobias, 23, who plays Lindsay.

Jeff Thomson, who co-wrote the music for "Virtually Me," said texting, postings on Facebook and other instant hi-tech communication has allowed bullying to spread beyond the school yard.

"When

I was in school, if kids were bullied, they would go home and it would cease," said Thomson, whose parents live in Dalton. "Now kids go home and [bullying] follows them there."

In addition to cyber-bullying, "Virtually Me" conveys how students can be addicted to technology.

Chloe spends all night texting on her cell phone rather than studying for a Spanish test, while Jasper posts a false profile of himself on the Internet to impress Lindsay. Chloe fails the test and Lindsay is hurt by Jasper's lies.

"[Technology] was supposed to bring us together, and it is having the opposite effect," Thomson said. "Instead of facing each other eye-to-eye, it's iPad to iPad."

Since playing the role of Lindsay, Tobias has realized she too was a texting junkie.

"I do feel I've cut down a little bit," she said.

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