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Hemmens play to address cyberbullying

By HARRY HITZEMAN

The Hemmens Cultural Center in Elgin has seen A-list visitors like Bill Cosby in recent months.

In addition to laughs, officials hope to provide a valuable lesson to students in the area with the musical, "Virtually Me!"

The 60-minute production addresses cyberbullying and is geared toward kids in fourth through ninth grades. Performances will be at 9:45 a.m. and noon on Nov. 8.

The Monday date was no accident as officials hope teachers will bring their students for field trips.

"The overall message of our show is technology is not bad when used responsibly," said Matt Murphy, producer at the New York-based Matt Murphy Productions, which also organized plays like "Altar Boyz."

Murphy, in a phone interview, said he started working on "Virtually Me!" about two years ago and he and writers interviewed school teachers and principals in Manhattan to find out what issues were pressing kids.

The top concern was cyberbullying, which is addressed in the musical when one student uses another student's blog to pick on a classmate.

Murphy said that 10 years ago, if a kid was getting bullied it was usually at recess where a teacher could witness it and hopefully stop it. Today, students attack each other via online social networks or lash out via texting or blogs.

Teachers are in the dark because the bullying is done off campus and during nonschool hours.

"Technology does not have to be a means to make you cooler. In fact, it can turn on you very quickly," Murphy said.

He said the touring musical kicked off two weeks ago, runs through April and has received good feedback so far from students. "Teachers and principals feel this message needs to be heard now," Murphy said.

The musical is part of the Performing Arts for Young People series at the Hemmens, 45 Symphony Way.

General admission tickets are \$7 and can be purchased by calling (847) 931-5900. For more information, visit hemmens.org.

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