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'42' shows how mentors can help overcome adversity

By Wendy Gerber

I attended the recent opening of the film "42" about Jackie Robinson's life and the breaking of the color line in baseball. At the end of the film, the audience applauded — significant because the screening was in Bedford, a pretty homogeneous enclave in northern Westchester.

Out of the audience of more than 200, only a handful of viewers weren't white. I can't remember the last time an entire audience clapped for a feature film like this.

The film was impactful both for its well-researched story of Robinson's life and for its compelling depiction of the institutional racism that existed not just in Major League Baseball but throughout American society. The film provides a strong lesson in civil rights, strength of character, the importance of having a mentor who believes in you, and a host of other important issues. It should be required viewing for middle school and high school students.

Branch Rickey, the Dodgers general manager, played by Harrison Ford, who makes the decision to hire Robinson and break the color barrier, not only gives Robinson a critical opportunity, but also guides him how best to overcome the bigotry and challenges that will confront him.

Rickey tells Robinson, who had been court-martialed in the Army for refusing an order to move to the back of a bus, to "turn the other cheek" at the overt rac-

ism he would encounter: "I want a player who's got the guts not to fight back." These compelling words form the heart of the story.

The bullying and racial epithets Robinson endures while learning to keep focused provides a powerful lesson for America's youth, many of whom are themselves tormented by bullying.

When Robinson's teammates, who were initially opposed to his joining the Dodgers, begin to come to his defense against bigotry, we see the strength and unity that comes from those who witness bullying or victimization and rise to the victim's defense, rather than remaining silent bystanders.

Robinson didn't just break the baseball color barrier, he prepared America for the civil rights movement. Although another two decades passed before it fully materialized, Robinson's stepping onto the field and up to the plate was more than a sports milestone.

It was a pivotal moment in U.S. history. Baseball was considered the national pastime, and the fact that Major League Baseball was all white was a reminder of how minorities were treated as second-class citizens. Black Americans fought and died for their country in World War II, but they returned home to separate drinking fountains and a ban on blacks in the major leagues.

It took Rickey's determination to break the unwritten color code in professional baseball. The depiction of racism in the film is important for young people to see. While they see individual cases of



AP PHOTOMARK J. TERRILL
Actor Harrison Ford, left, talks to Los Angeles Dodgers co-owner Earvin "Magic" Johnson, right. With them was Jackie Robinson's widow, Rachel Robinson. Ford threw the ceremonial first pitch before the Dodgers' baseball game against the San Diego Padres on April 15 in Los Angeles.

bullying and prejudice all too frequently, they don't understand or witness institutional racism.

Considering that Major League Baseball is now one of the most racially diverse professional sports organizations in the United States, it is compelling for younger audiences to see that baseball was once a purely white institution. Until 2008, so too was the presidency.

Many youth across America can benefit from having mentors in their lives who believe in them and can support and

guide them, as Rickey did with Robinson. Mentoring USA, with which I am associated, works with underserved youth across America to provide one-to-one site-based mentoring services to enable young people to achieve their potential.

The program founded by former New York first lady Matilda Raffa Cuomo became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in 1995, and has provided mentors for more than 5,000 children since its inception and serves youth nationally and internationally.

We need to provide support and guidance as mentors to ensure that young people believe in themselves, have a caring support system, and have the tools to achieve their goals.

The film "42" is far more than a movie about a baseball legend. It is a compelling story of believing in yourself, rising up against intolerance and racism, having the support of a mentor who helps you pursue your dreams, and keeping your eye on the ball even when faced with setbacks or racism. And it is a story of the importance of solidarity.

The movie should be required viewing for middle school and high school students — and adults — to remind us of America's progress and how much we have left to achieve.

The writer, who lives in Cross River, is managing director of Mentoring USA, a leading national site-based mentoring program to enable young people to realize their potential. Learn more at www.mentoringusa.org.