

Actors try to reach teens with stories of mental illness

Drama, not just a preachy recitation of facts, lets students know it's OK to seek help



David Hornreich, from left, Phil deGuzman, Maura Kidwell and Angela Alise Johnson perform with Erasing the Distance at Elk Grove High School. (Keri Wiginton, Chicago Tribune / February 23, 2012)

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Back in high school, I had a default pose for assemblies. I'd slouch in my seat, cross my arms and lower my eyelids to half-mast.

"This is so stupid," my body language was meant to say. "I don't need to hear this."

Now, my body language sometimes had a point. I still remember the weightlifters whose feats of strength were supposed to inspire us to say no to drugs, and the teacher who tearfully begged us not to toss our graduation caps lest they come down to punch corner-first through a classmate's skull.

Most of the time, though, I was just being a typical teenage know-it-all. Lord knows how much potentially useful information I ignored just because I decided to act like a brat.

I thought of that the other morning when I dropped by Elk Grove High School to check out an assembly of undeniable importance. It was about mental illness, a subject that draws cringes and evasive, nervous laughter in plenty of adults. How, I wondered, would it go down with kids?

The school had brought in a Chicago-based theater company called Erasing the Distance to address depression and **substance abuse** in an unusual way: The group interviews people grappling with various disorders, then uses actors to bring those stories to life.

School counselor Danielle McCarthy had seen the company perform at an anti-bullying conference and thought its methods might be effective with her students. Elk Grove spends a lot of time fighting the stigma surrounding issues of mental health, she said, but for all the progress she felt the school has made, the work was not complete.

"I'm hopeful that the kids can relate to it in some way, if it's for them or someone they know about," she said as dozens of sleepy sophomores filed into the auditorium. "I want them to know it's OK to talk about it and get help."

The lights went down, and after some familiar tittering and wisecracking, the show began. Chicago actor David Hornreich played a young baseball prodigy whose lack of high school success sent him into a tailspin of depression and drug abuse, while his colleague Phil de Guzman portrayed a lonely, self-injuring misfit who found a treacherous salvation in cocaine.

The acting was powerful without being preachy, and when it was over, a Q-and-A session led by company founder Brighid O'Shaughnessy indicated that at least some of the kids had been paying attention.

One girl said she had stayed silent about a friend's substance abuse but would try to persuade the friend to leave parties where drugs and alcohol were being used. Another picked up on the idea that adults don't always understand the hurt their words and actions can cause to a child.

O'Shaughnessy told me later it had been a pretty tough crowd — polite but not visibly moved. At other schools, she said, kids have wept and volunteered their own stories of struggle, relieved they finally could put a name to the symptoms that have dragged them into darkness.

But she added that an absence of outward drama isn't a reliable indicator of what might have been accomplished. The group tries to measure its effect with pre- and post-show surveys, she said, and has found that after a performance, audience members say they know more about mental disorders and think more kindly about the people suffering from them.

"Even when kids are shifting and looking like they're not paying attention, they're the ones who will later talk to the counselor," she said.

So was the assembly a success? It's hard to say for sure, obviously, but I thought so. When the students were picking up their backpacks and heading to class, I had a quick chat with a couple of 16-year-olds.

They said that they liked the performance and that it had been much more interesting than a dry recitation of facts. One of them mentioned a friend who had recently attempted suicide. The student said she had failed to see the warning signs in her friend that, in retrospect, were quite clear.

"I'll probably watch for them a little more carefully now," she said.

She won't be the only one, I'll bet. Somewhere in that auditorium, I imagine, a too-cool kid with crossed arms and half-lowered eyelids was caught off guard as a little spark of sympathy or self-awareness fluttered through his armor.

"That wasn't stupid at all," he probably thought. "I really did need to hear that."

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