Alumna uses theatre to garner awareness about mental health issues

While working at a mental health social service organization, Brighid O’Shaughnessy (SNL MA ’07) used her acting background to help adults with mental illnesses tell their own stories. Despite the powerful nature of these performances, she noticed a palpable disconnect between the audience and the narrative. It was then that she was struck with the idea to use professional actors to bring these stories to life. “I felt if we used actors, people would get so swept up in what they were seeing, they would forget they were watching a performance,” she explains. “Instead, they’d think, ‘I’ve felt that. I’ve experienced that.’ We’d be able to erase the distance, and people would see mental health as something closer to them than they realized in the past.”

O’Shaughnessy’s organization, Erasing the Distance, seeks to generate awareness about mental health issues by bringing performances to schools, conferences and other venues. “We do that by gathering true stories and using people’s exact words performed by professional actors to start conversations, break down stigma and get the healing process started,” she says. Performances can be about individuals, families or friends—Erasing the Distance will hear any story a person is willing to tell. “We’re not there to diagnose, fix, come up with a treatment plan or offer advice,” she says. “We are there just to witness, listen and ask powerful questions so that a person feels like they can dive into the depth of their experience.”

Throughout the years, she has encountered a number of responses to her performances. “We are with ourselves all day long, so we don’t realize sometimes the weight that we hold within our own bodies and our own hearts,” she says. “It can be freeing to have an actor hold that for you, even if just for a short while.” Yet, it can also be uncomfortable, which O’Shaughnessy believes to be very powerful. “It’s so cool to see the audience’s response to the stories,” she says. “To look out and see a family sitting together and, during one of the pieces, see one person reach out and hold the other’s hand. That energizes me, because I see what we’re doing is bringing people together. It’s causing conversations.”

Before O’Shaughnessy started Erasing the Distance, she was adrift. “I’m someone with an incredibly varied background,” she says. “I was an actor, a director, a teacher and a life coach. I had done a lot of things with social activism. I knew I wanted to bring all my different interests into something, but I didn’t know what that was going to look like.”

She enrolled in the applied professional studies master’s program with an idea and left as the founder of a nonprofit organization. “SNL was my laboratory,” she laughs. From sharpening grant-writing abilities to developing strong managerial skills, O’Shaughnessy learned much of what she needed to know about running her own not-for-profit at SNL.

Yet, the most important lesson O’Shaughnessy learned is that she can’t do everything herself. “I’ve effected a lot of change on my own,” she says. “But I think the exponential way we’ve been able to grow as an organization and touch more people is through us as a collective taking responsibility. You never know someone’s story.”

“Veterans’ Voices,” an Erasing the Distance production, has been selected to be a part of the DePaul President’s Signature Series. Celebrate Memorial Day with O’Shaughnessy and her ensemble of actors on May 23, 5:30 p.m., at the Daley Building, 14 E. Jackson Blvd., Lower Level 102.