“This is turning into a therapy session,” says actress Angela Alise as she wipes the tears from her eyes. “Which it always does with Erasing the Distance,” Erasing the Distance (ETD) founder Brighid O’Shaughnessy responds, laughing at the aftermath her heartfelt answer has created.

It’s that kind of sincerity and empathy that has made ETD more than a theater company and into a reservoir of healing for individuals dealing directly and indirectly with mental illness.

This “therapy session” started when O’Shaughnessy described her encounter with a young woman named Marlena. “When Marlena first came to us, she saw her friend’s story in one of the shows. She said, ‘You know I really want my story to be told too.’ She reached out three times but cancelled three times before she came in. I think she was excited to share but ashamed because she had a lot in her past. I found out from the volunteer that when she did finally share she closed her eyes the whole time. That was for two hours. She told me later it was because she didn’t feel she could look herself in the face, and by sharing with somebody else, she felt like she was looking in a mirror.”

Sharing one’s story like Marlena is the first phase in the ETD process. The stories are then adapted for the stage and finally brought to life in shows with professional actors. In Marlena’s case, a couple of years passed before O’Shaughnessy called her about using her story in one of their shows. She was touched by her growth. “She said, ‘Brighid, just the act of sharing my story was so freeing to me. I had so much shame about sexual abuse, prostitution, homelessness, and I felt like just by sharing it with another human being I didn’t have to hold it in anymore.’”

Marlena has gone on to obtain her master’s degree in Social Work and has paid what ETD did for her forward by talking to youth with her same struggles in post-show discussions. O’Shaughnessy beams with pride through tears, “To me that’s the greatest reward. To feel like in a years’ time, we took someone who held so much shame about her experience, to feeling like she could be a cheerleader and champion for others. It shows the power of what theater can do.”

For ten years O’Shaughnessy, with the help of faithful volunteers and staff, has collected stories like Marlena’s, transforming them into performance pieces done in theaters, schools, churches, community centers and other non-traditional venues, hoping to “disarm stigma, spark dialogue, educate, and promote healing” as their mission states. The topics have ranged from mental health issues surrounding veterans, violence, depression and bipolar disorder.

Currently, they are gearing up for the world premiere of their next show “Coming Home” in August. Directed by Ron E. Rains, “Coming Home” explores the lives of five African-Americans, including Marlena, struggling with homelessness, addiction, self-injury, depression and other mental health challenges.

ETD company member Angela Alise (with the company since 2009) plays Chloe and is excited about what this means for youth. “I feel a lot of younger people I know feel like their stories aren’t being told,” says Alise. “They are included in this show. I know there are young African-Americans that have experienced Chloe’s story and I want them to see this for sure.”

Actor Greg Geffrard plays Sean and talks about how retelling the stories of real people in their own words, bolstered his appreciation of language. “I think sometimes as actors, unfortunately we take liberties with words,” he says. “It’s just instead of saying, I need some time, we’ll say I need a little time. And we don’t think it makes that much difference. But to know this is a person’s story, and that little word can make all the difference in the world, I’m appreciative of that, because it not only makes me a better artist but a better listener.”

O’Shaughnessy hopes with this show people will see the humanity of those they might encounter struggling with homelessness. “I want people to see that homelessness has a story behind it. The person you see on Wacker Drive or the person you see asking for money on the train, they have a story. They are someone’s mother, father and sibling. They have a whole history that brought them to that place. If you got curious enough, there might be change that could happen.”

She also hopes “Coming Home” breaks down the stigma around the issues discussed and promotes healing and honest dialogue, which will in return motivate people to reach out for help.

Retrospectively looking back on ETD’s ten years, O’Shaughnessy talks about what she hopes the legacy of ETD will be.

“I feel like we live in a world where it’s very hard to listen and be heard. The primary way so many people communicate is via email, Facebook and these things that are not human to human,” she says. “So the legacy I would like to leave is that people feel like they were listened to, had a chance to listen, and were free to have conversations they wouldn’t have ordinarily had.”

The tears begin to build up again. “Erasing the Distance is about caring about people as whole people. And anyone who is touched by us. Audience members, actors, storytellers, board members, if they feel they were held in that way. Then I feel like the legacy has been birthed and has the potential to keep going in that direction.”

Erasing the Distance performs “Coming Home” at South Side Community Art Center, 3831 South Michigan, (872)529-1383, erasingthedistance.org, $10-$20. August 11-13.