

# When Drama Meets Trauma

**An ensemble shines the spotlight on mental health issues**

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The house lights dim and the small talk fades as the stage lights illuminate the Latino Cultural Center of Chicago. Micah Figueroa wears a gray button-down shirt and takes center stage. He starts by telling the audience about his drinking habit, explaining that inebriation allows him to avoid dealing with certain aspects of himself or the shameful things he has done, such as sleeping with another man. He chokes on and stumbles over his words as he recounts hitting rock bottom. As he recalls the process of piecing himself back together, he begins to snifle and fight back tears. Although this is a true story, it is not actually about him at all; he is performing the story of another man: Julio, a gay man of color who is watching his performance.

Erasing the Distance is an organization that puts a therapeutic spin on how people see and experience the theatre. Its plays address the truths

people experience, including emotional trauma and mental illness.

Brigid O'Shaughnessy, the founder of Erasing the Distance, created the program to enable people living with mental illness to tell their stories without fear of judgment. In 2005, O'Shaughnessy conceived a program where participants share their personal narratives with actors. Then the actors transform their stories into performative monologues.

Volunteer story collectors transcribe the interviews and create the monologue using the participants' language. Heather Bodie, the artistic director of Erasing the Distance, says the transcription process is grueling. But the real challenge comes when the story collectors have to condense what could be a 30-page interview into a two-page monologue. To ensure this, the story collectors undergo extensive training in order to gain an understanding of the potential impact of their work and, most im-


portantly, responsible and respectful story collecting.

"That's the hardest part, because everything on those pages is that person's truth," she says. "It's their experience."

Erasing the Distance also uses the guidance of the Clinical Company, a team of mental health professionals. While the actors in Erasing the Distance are not licensed clinicians, they try to bridge the gap between education and support by partnering with those who are.

"[A social worker] is assigned to every production that we work on and then works with that actor to make sure they have a full understanding of the different representation in mental health issues appearing in the piece," Bodie says. Members of the Clinical Company attend the performances and conduct discussions after the shows with the actors. The group helps others find professional help by providing resources.

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—Heather Bodie**



Part of this training includes understanding the participants' perspective by having the story collectors switch roles and share something about their journeys with other ensemble members.

"I felt like another human being understood me in a way that was more direct than just listening to me," story collector Brenda Barrie says. "My best friend, Jenny, was addicted to meth.' I heard somebody across from me saying that, and her own eyes could well up with tears because she knew the heart that I carry with that."

At Erasing the Distance, the person sharing the story is in control at all times. At any point, they can

change what is included in the story. They are granted absolute anonymity, and consent is confirmed three times throughout the process.

"After a few days of reflection, they can say, 'I shared that story about my mother, but I'd like to leave that part out,'" Bodie says.

Some participants find healing before the show even begins. Erasing the Distance has had participants come in, share their stories and leave satisfied, not even needing to attend a performance. Others, however, come to every show with an entourage of family and friends.

"That is a part of their healing process," Barrie says. "Owning where

they are, where they've been and how far they've come."

One of Barrie's favourite parts of the shows is when audiences come in expecting a lecture on mental health but leave having experienced so much more because the raw and visceral performances shed light on internal struggles so many face.

"You're not doing a dramatic monologue up there. You're not doing *Hamlet*," Barrie says. "We're just up there trying to share in the most honest way possible; people are deeply moved." ■