

Understanding complex issues through art

BY OWEN PROCTOR
North Jersey Community Newspapers

The sister comes to her brother's house upset that he hasn't signed some family papers. He has ignored her directions. "Life is going on. You better get on the train," she says.

"I haven't been myself lately. I seem to have lost all passion for life," he says. "Did you ever lay in bed and wish you never woke up?"

A man is frustrated with his granddaughter's constant gibbering

about her problems. She is overwhelmed with schoolwork. She can't sleep or eat, is nauseous and has chest pains. He suggests her problems are self-generated or a figment of her imagination.

In these two skits, recently performed for the Bridgewater Woman's Club, actors Ronit Kalmanor of Belleville, Dorothy Scheifler of Basking Ridge, Gabe Kardos of Mountainside and Ben Lorber of West Orange demonstrated symptoms of mental illness and typical reactions to them. The

first skit dealt with depression; the second, generalized anxiety disorder.

The Mental Health Players are a Verona-based troupe that educates the public about mental illness and the importance of getting help for those in need. "The purpose of this program is to not back away but to go towards someone," said Sharon Curran, the players' community education coordinator. "When we turn our backs on obvious problems, the person will spiral down without help."

At a point during performances, Curran facilitates an interaction between the characters and the audience to assess how they would react to the situation.

Mental illnesses, the group teaches, are just like any other ailment. They are medical in nature and may lead to serious consequences if not treated. In addition to raising awareness and erasing stigmas for community groups and schools, the group also gives "hands-on" advice about how to

interact with people with certain symptoms. This is particularly important for people in law enforcement or social services.

The Mental Health Association of New Jersey started the Mental Health Players program 26 years ago. The group covers a wide range of topics, including mood disorders, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, dementia, Alzheimer's disease, eating disorders, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The topic is up to the organization requesting the presentation.

Curran's group primarily works in Bergen, Essex, Passaic and Hudson counties. Since she started directing the program, the Montclair resident has required more training for the volunteers, who normally do not have prior acting experience. She now provides a comprehensive overview of mental illness symptoms and how to depict them, and teaches such theater techniques as pantomime and how to present in the round.

About 40 people currently par-

ticipate in the program, Curran said. About 10 percent of the volunteers have actually been diagnosed with a mental illness, and sometimes share their experiences when they "de-role" after a performance, she said.

After initial training, the volunteers are provided a schedule with topics. She coordinates who can perform where. Rehearsals are usually held at the site within an hour of the actual performance. Once the actors learn how to depict the symptoms, the scenes are basically improvised from there.

The Mental Health Players are now recruiting volunteers for the 2005 season. The registration deadline is Jan. 10. Daytime and evening training will be provided Jan. 17, 18, 24, 25 and 31 at the Social Services Building, 60 S. Fullerton Ave., Room 105, Montclair. Interested actors should call 973-571-4100, ext. 125.

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CORRECTION

In last week's 2004 Quad-Town football team picks, Nick Giandrando of Belleville was misidentified as Mike Giandrando.

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