



Office of
Mental Health

OMH News

August 2016

ANN MARIE T. SULLIVAN, M.D.
Commissioner



The Arts

Expression and its Role
in Mental Health Therapy



Whether it is painting, writing, or performing, the arts have long played a valuable role in mental health therapy.

Research suggests that tapping into the creative process can help improve mental health by increasing focus, reducing symptoms of stress and depression, and improving mood.

Innovative mental health professionals in France and Germany recognized this in the early 20th century. Originally regarding inpatient art as something that could only be analyzed, they started encouraging its use in therapy and eventually celebrating its originality.

Artistic works by people with mental illness are considered part of the rebellious genre called “outsider art,” “art brut,” or “raw art” – all of which refer to a style of art created outside an official institutional culture and without formal training that can express unconventional ideas, extreme mental states, or elaborate fantasy worlds.

Such works are being recognized for their vision, technique, and vital stories they tell. They capture creative impulses, tension, struggles, pain, and joy.

Psychiatrists in New York were among the leaders in understanding the value of artistic expression in therapy. The monthly literary newsletter, *The Opal*, produced from 1851 to 1860 by inpatients at what was then called the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica, gave patients an outlet for their poems, essays, and news articles on their experiences.

Today, OMH facilities and programs offer many forms of art therapy. New York State is home to the innovative Living Museums at Creedmoor and Rockland Psychiatric Centers and their inspiring collections.

In this edition of *OMH News*, we’ll discuss how artistic creativity is flourishing in our facilities and programs – and how it’s helping New Yorkers to recover.

We welcome your thoughts. Please contact us at: omhnews@omh.ny.gov.

OMH
News
Bulletin

Prohibiting Discrimination in Mental health

New York informs health insurers of their responsibility to provide the same level of coverage for mental health and substance use disorders as for medical or surgical care. Read more at <http://on.ny.gov/2aDaX9f>.

Art Therapy: Expression in a Safe Environment

“The process of making art facilitates expression of feelings for youth who may struggle to do so,” said Rosa Lombard, Art Therapist at the Bronx Campus of the New York City Children’s Center (NYCCC). “It allows the youth to express themselves through the artwork they create in a safe environment.”

For those who have suffered trauma, the process can serve as a means of communication, providing a path for children who resist verbalizing sensitive issues to make progress through a non-threatening approach.

“As clinicians, it’s our responsibility to ensure we are offering a wide range of patient-centered treatment interventions to those we serve in an effort to maximize success and personal growth,” Lombard said. “Most would agree that people do not learn the same way, and so we can reason we do not communicate the same.”



At the NYCCC-Bronx Campus, art therapy can be conducted in groups or less-formally. Art therapists work with a child’s primary therapist to develop a program to increasing socialization skills – including developing sensitivity toward peers, being able to listen and share attention; expressing feelings or traumatic experiences in a manner that allows the youth to take responsibility for their own healing, which is a necessary

ingredient for progress; and developing a sense of independence by forming their individual identity, and learning to use non-verbal and symbolic methods to express feelings and emotions.

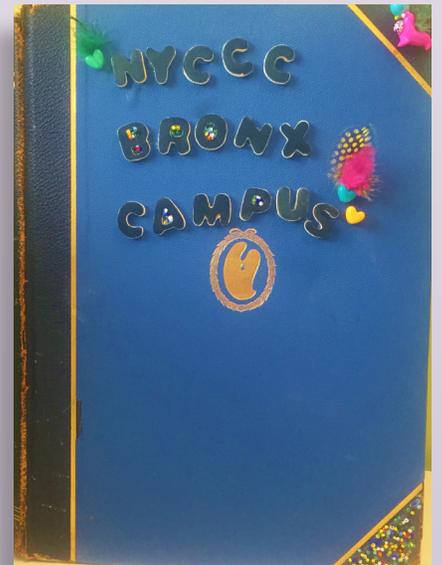
Art therapists work with a variety of media, tailored to fit each child’s needs. Projects have included book decoration, collage, dance, drawing, music, painting, clay modeling, storytelling, mask-making, drama, origami, pretend play, sewing, beading, doll making, poetry, and puppet-making.



“Art therapy is one piece of the multi-disciplinary approach we offer our youth,” Lombard said. “We’ve observed that those who receive art therapy treatment are able to use the coping skills they learned during our sessions

during in times of distress. I’ve seen those who have suffered trauma achieve a sense of empowerment by using art to ‘change their story.’ There is also, of course, the almost euphoric feeling of triumph when one has mastered drawing a perfectly round and symmetrical shining sun.”

“Success in our youth is accredited to their hard work and willingness to participate in their treatment,” Lombard added. “Each and every child is a success story in their own unique way.” ONH



Public Spaces: Developing a Sense of Ownership



“This project was to upgrade an austere courtyard and create a vibrant space that is inviting to all,” said Maxine Breeden, Rehabilitation Vocational Assistant II at the NYCCC-Queens Campus.

“Our goal was to create an environment that fostered physical activity. By redesigning the courtyard between our inpatient and day treatment buildings, we essentially created a positive environment that promotes students social and emotional growth.”

The new courtyard was a collaboration between OMH and the New York State Education Department. “Staff worked side-by-side our young people in Kindergarten to Grade 12 to create this environment,” Breeden said. “It was integral that our students have ownership, being involved in design and implementation. From the color palette, to the choice of flowers and vegetables, students took an active role.”

Funding for the project was granted through Scott LoPresti, Assistant Principal of the Day Treatment Program. Supervisor Peter Venza and Assistant Pamela Sage of the New York City Department of Sanitation arranged for delivery of garbage truck tires that are being used as planters.

“Our students have become much more mindful of their new environment and have taken an active role in maintaining this beautiful and inspiring landscape,” Breeden said. OMH



The Living Museums: Safe Spaces for Creation and Healing

Extreme creativity and mental illness can overlap and, in turn, lead to healing.

This is one of the founding principles of the Living Museum at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center and its spin-off at the Rockland Psychiatric Center.

Living Museum at Creedmoor

The Creedmoor museum was founded in the 1970s by artist Bolek Greczynski and Creedmoor psychologist Janos Marton, Ph.D, seeking to give patients an opportunity to see their mental illness as a creative advantage, rather than as a limitation.

The Living Museum differs from traditional art therapy. Artwork that is produced during therapy is considered a part of the process and cannot be exhibited. But at the Living Museum, art is produced for exhibition.

Working through the Living Museum has helped some of the program's alumni to develop successful careers as working artists.

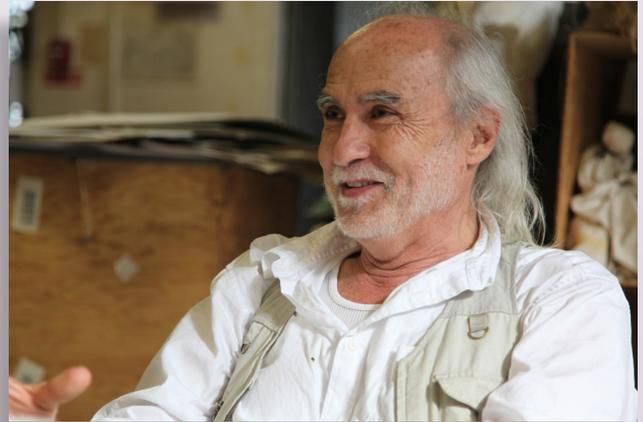
"Because of the stigma society associates with mental illness, the view that inpatients can have of themselves can be self-destructive," Marton said. "This can strip them of their humanity and reduce their identity to that of a 'mental patient.' The Living Museum program provides a space of safety, a space that belongs to them, in which participants can change their identity from a mental patient to a mentally ill artist – which can be a major step in their journey to recovery."

The two converted a dining hall in an older building into a studio and exhibition areas. The program grew to be so successful that it moved in 1983 into a larger 40,000 square-foot space in Building 75. Today, the museum displays the art of more than 500 current and former patients.

The program takes advantage of the fact that patients have enough time on their hands to dedicate to perfecting their art. "Our artists-in-residence are here every day creating and they become incredibly good. Once an artist is caught by the bug to create, that gives them the something to look forward to – something satisfying and essential."

"In some, mental illness can provide the fanciful space that feeds the creative process," Marton added. "The rejection and hardship experienced by people with mentally illness can be a motivating factor for expression." As Greczynski, who died in 1994, told participants: "Use your vulnerabilities as a weapon."

Continued on the **next page**



Dr. Janos Marton

Photo by The Brooklyn Cottage

Working spaces inside the Living Museum at Creedmoor.



Photo by Artlab



Photo by Long Island Oddities



Living Museum at Rockland

About 40 miles north of Creedmoor is the six-year-old Rockland Living Museum (RLM) in Orangeburg. An offshoot of the Creedmoor museum, the RLM is an open art studio for members who enjoy creative expression.

“We believe that every person is creative and, given the right conditions, people can open up and flourish,” said Director Christine Randolph. “The RLM provides an atmosphere of joy and peace. It gives them creative time to express emotions. Our artists can leave their worries and concerns at the door and enter a space of exploration and experimentation.”

The RLM works with Rockland Psychiatric Center inpatients and outpatients, people living in community residences and group homes, and those who are living on their own. It supports expression through a wide range of materials, such as weaving, painting, clay, sculpture, collage, mosaics, recycled and found material sculptures, printmaking, doll making, sewing, crocheting, and wood building.

The museum includes a garden in which participants can grow vegetables and flowers, watch birds, and enjoy nature. It conducts art shows in local libraries and cafes where the artists can sell their work. It helps participants connect with their peers through discussions, art exhibits, and field trips to museums and galleries. It also promotes well-being through yoga and exercise programs.



Christine Randolph

“The RLM is designed to be a haven from the harsh realities of life and a source of creativity and personal growth,” Randolph said. “It gives some clients – after years of institutionalization – the ability to experience freedom and unlimited possibilities. There are no rules in art, and any emotion can be channeled without negative consequences.”

Randolph has seen participants become less despairing and more hopeful. Creating art helps them organize internally and develop better self-esteem and self-perception. “They work through emotional issues rather than acting them out,” she said. “Their art tells their stories and allows them to accept themselves and move forward into the future.” One client went on to graduate from Columbia University.

“It’s amazing how many people show up every week for art, music, and dance,” Randolph said. “People demonstrate a striking level of harmony within the community and seem to thrive in the joyful and peaceful atmosphere. Many clients have told me ‘This is the one place I can relax and be myself. I feel accepted and understood.’” OWN



Poetry:

Seeking Deeper Expression, Greater Understanding

Because of its intimate nature, poetry can play an important role in helping people with mental illness to express themselves and, in turn, help society understand mental illness.

“Artistic techniques, whether through the written and spoken word or visual mediums, allow for the expression of feelings and thoughts that may be too difficult or painful to express through more traditional forms of psychotherapy,” said Licensed Psychologist Paul S. Saks, Ph.D., Saks has been running an inpatient poetry therapy group for four years at Manhattan Psychiatric Center (MPC).

“When treated with respect and when placed in a situation in which their efforts are personally meaningful and taken seriously, people are capable of doing the most extraordinary things,” Saks said. “People in our group have written amazing poetry.”

Organization and Regulation

The group incorporates ideas from psychodynamic psychotherapy, poetry and bibliotherapies. Group members engage in sophisticated discussions. By taking part in a structured environment and engaging in meaningful activities, individuals can attain a sense of organization and regulation in both thoughts and feelings.

The MPC poetry group is designed to encourage thoughtful self-expression. “Members who are usually withdrawn or internally preoccupied routinely create poems or contribute to the discussion,” Saks said. “The program can help individuals with diagnoses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder organize their thoughts and regulate their feelings.”

Upon joining, members are given a journal book and are encouraged to write on their own. Each week, members share and discuss poems they have written.

Group leaders present several poems on a theme, selecting poems that the facilitator feels matches the mood of the group or encompasses an issue shared by many of its members. Themes can center on a particular poet, ranging from classic poetry to rap; a style, such as Haiku; or it can be seasonal or related to the news. Poems are read as a group, with each member reading several lines aloud. “Even those members who are considered to be internally preoccupied are usually able to follow along and read at the appropriate time,” Saks said. Participants discuss the themes of the poems they’ve just heard – recent issues have included depression, abandonment, isolation, stigmatization, family issues, and mourning.

Working with a Theme

Often, though not always, the participants take part in a structured writing activity based on a theme. For example, in one meeting, the group considered poems that were connected by the experience of “looking in the mirror” – such as poems and songs by Sylvia Plath, Dorothy Parker, and Michael Jackson.



Paul S. Saks, Ph.D

*I look into the mirror and see...
Me.*

*The hue of a tree
Tall, mature loving and kind.
Looking ahead
Never over dwelling on those behind*

*I look into the mirror and see
The universe as a garden
That has spring flowers
Or suffering winter snow
Wearing her mother's 4 changing seasons of each year
And the season is you.*

*I cannot move on without you knowing
So I'll take the dive while the wind is blowing
If you glance at my eyes while my thoughts are showing
You'll see that I think you're beautiful
All of the foolish things a man can do
I prefer to at least be stupid and true
As I brace myself for the sting from you (excerpt)*

*What does it all mean?
Someday it will all make sense
What is there to see?
Someday it will all be clear
Light and dark, a different game,
Or does it all mean the same?*

(A Japanese tanka poem, written in a 5-7-5-7-7 format)

Continued on the **next page**

Continued from the **previous page**

Members wrote poems with the given initial line, "I look in the mirror and see..." Another group read poems about masks, written by Paul Lawrence Dunbar and others, and wrote with the given title, "My Mask." They were encouraged to draw representations of the masks they wear into the world.

The group works with poetic forms that call for organized, structured writing. "It's remarkable how structure, when provided from the outside, can be internalized and used in the process of recovery," Saks said.

Capturing Imaginations

Saks has seen changes in the group, as a result. "I have seen one individual go from writing rather disorganized poems to creating far more coherent, sophisticated and at times brilliant works," he said. "I've seen other individuals initially sit in isolated, internally-preoccupied states and then have their imaginations captured by a passage from Shakespeare, for example, and make an insightful comment. Even a small change, say having an otherwise silent member volunteer to read a few lines from a poem or recite a rap they had created years before can herald a powerful beginning on the path to recovery."

"Members of the group are proud to be part of something bigger than themselves," Saks said. "The Poetry Group has a reputation, their works are published, and there is an inherent spirit of collaboration and respect. It inspires people to craft communication that others can understand and appreciate. This helps with what can be called thought disorder. At its heart, serious mental illness often marginalizes people and decimates their self-esteems. Being a part of this special group goes a long way in rectifying this."¹⁰

My Advice

*I was just sitting here
Thinking about my past,
and wishing I'd never left home.
Back then you were only a baby
and I was just a kid myself;
about seventeen or so.*

*No words can express how sorry I am
For missing out on so much
So I'm taking the time to let you know
That I wish I could turn back the hands of time
But I can't,
And that's just the way things sometimes go.*

*I'd like to share with you a thing or two about life however,
And that is,
If you let it,
It can lead you down a rocky road,
And because there are no guarantees of your success,
It's important that you cling to your dreams,
even when you're growing old.*

*I'd also like to give you some advice,
which is to think before you re-act,
'cause it's the consequences that will keep you from reaching your goals,
and try not to predict the future
for tomorrow is a mystery
so take things nice and slow.*

*What I'm trying to say is,
Don't hurry when making decisions
'cause trust me your mistakes are all your own,
And if by chance you become confused
Just remember to ask for help,
'cause you're never really alone,*

*and even though I can't be there with you,
I hope you get some comfort and relief
via the words of this poem,
when I tell you how proud I am
of your accomplishments and how beautifully
you have grown.*

— **By Gina Misner**

*Soft is the wind that blows
I can tell the sorrow in your heart that grows
If I could only trace back in time
You'll see I had a love so divine
Separated like monkeys in a cage
Wondering what the hell I'm gonna do
I keep searching for the love I know is true*

Music: Melodies and Beats Effecting our Emotions

We use music to stir up excitement, to celebrate, and to relax. Because music can have such a strong influence on our moods and even our nervous systems, programs that are run, licensed, or funded by OMH are finding it to be a valuable part of therapy.

Insight into Each Other's Culture

"Music is a very powerful tool. It can guide emotions and help to stay balanced," said Rachid Ottley, a Peer Specialist at South Beach Psychiatric Center who runs a music therapy program and recording studio there. "It's a tool that I feel is sometimes overlooked but can bring much comfort to an individual. Like some forms of meditation music extends the ability to relax your mind and focus more clearly."

When Ottley was diagnosed with mental illness, music was among many other therapeutic resources kept him grounded. "It allowed me to not be mentally preoccupied with the fact that I was hospitalized," Ottley said. "It brought me peace and allowed me to reflect on how life was during the better days. With this I was truly inspired to become actively engaged in my treatment."

"My thought was: 'Hey, this worked for me as well as many of my peers, so let's promote this on an even higher scale.'" Ottley started a program for patients at South Beach that includes a music appreciation class. The class listens to several genres of music, sometimes by request from the participants. "This generates conversation, dance and the ability for people to share cultural differences," he said.

Ottley was also instrumental in setting up a small recording studio at South Beach. "It's has really attracted some wonderful talent here at South Beach. They come up with lyrics and record over music tracks. It's a lot of fun for me and they enjoy it a lot."

"It's a program that's been well-received and it promotes healthy living and a willingness to learn," Ottley said. This led them to start organizing talent shows, which have become popular with clients, families, and staff. The studio has also been used to record poetry and spoken word pieces written by clients at the facility. "Even those not seriously involved in creating have taken the opportunity to record themselves – just because it's so much fun."

The response has been so positive that South Beach is scheduled to open a similar media studio in its newly opened Recovery Center for its outpatient population.

"The art of musical expression is so powerful and provides an additional outlet to express oneself," Ottley said. "I've seen so many individuals use this platform as a way to cope with stressors often faced while being hospitalized. It's fun, free, and it opens the door to options that can be carried into the community upon leaving the hospital."

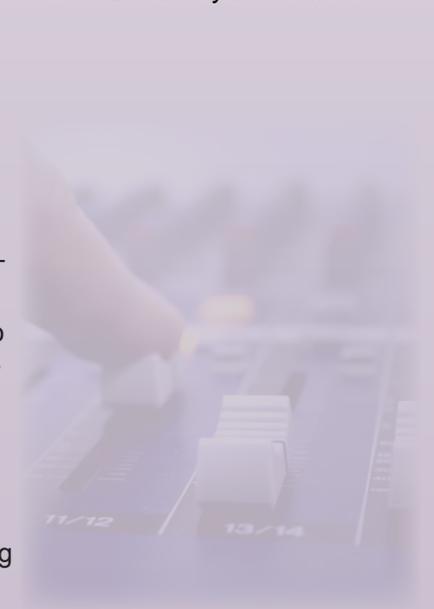
The music program is helping to bring about changes in its participants. "I've seen some people who had isolated themselves becoming more engaged," Ottley said. "We have individuals who have assisted me in the media room taking on the role of helping others – which is great because these same people become closer friends and can be of support to each other."



Ottley (left) and Nurse Administrator Pete Shiffman at the controls in the recording studio at South Beach Psychiatric Center.



South Beach Psychiatric Center



Continued on the **next page**

Generating New Thoughts and Feelings

David Abbenda, a Recreation Therapist in music for the past 16 years at the Capital District Psychiatric Center (CDPC), runs a music appreciation group for 10 to 25 clients that presents a wide variety of music and musicians with which group members may not be familiar.

“My philosophy on presenting unfamiliar music is that clients come to this facility to change and new music can generate new thoughts and feelings — which may help as they move forward in their recovery,” Abbenda said.

CDPC also offers clients the opportunity to engage in music-making as a group, which can include singing or playing instruments. “These types of activities allow clients to connect with other group members and be part of the same experience,” Abbenda said. “I tell clients about opportunities to see live music in the community with a focus on low-cost or free concerts.”

Abbenda and fellow Recreation Therapist Brian Jackson lead a drumming group of about six to 10 clients who are recruited by Jackson or accepted by referral. The group gives people a chance to make music together and work collaboratively. “People in this group really want to do some drumming!” Abbenda said, adding, “This is also our loudest group, as you might imagine.” Although this is geared to be an experiential group, it has performed at some facility functions.

Over the years Abbenda has worked with many clients individually. “This is where person-centered care is at its purest level,” he said. “We have always had talented musicians receiving care here, and I am often brought in to work with them on maintaining their connection to this important outlet for self-expression.”

Abbenda has also been called upon to teach people how to play an instrument or to improve their playing, which ties in with the goal of giving them skills they can take with them to succeed in the community. “One woman that I worked with played and sang original songs and improvisations at an OMH sponsored art show at the Empire State Plaza,” he said.

One long-running music activity was started on one of the inpatient units by psychologist Dr. Leonard Hoss. Years ago, he started a coffeehouse hour on Fridays as a fun way to wrap up the week. They serve coffee and occasionally baked goods or snacks, while clients from that unit perform songs accompanied by Dr. Hoss, Abbenda, and

“This has been something that many people on the unit look forward to and ask about during the week,” Abbenda said. “When the program director from this unit moved to a different unit, he requested that they have something similar there, because it was so successful.”

These coffeehouses also provide many of clients the opportunity to practice performing songs for CDPC’s annual talent show, which takes place in December. “The talent show is one of our bigger events,” Abbenda said. “There are many clients who will seek me out in the weeks before the talent show to rehearse and provide accompaniment. I’m often able to recruit staff from other disciplines to join in on accompanying performers, so this is another example of people developing their ability to achieve goals collaboratively. Working with others is a key component to successful recovery.”

On Mondays, during an afternoon break in scheduled groups, there is a sing-along in the mall area, which is open to anyone who wishes to attend. “Since it’s held in a common area, there are many people who sit in the periphery who will tell us that they enjoy hearing the music,” Abbenda said.

“That’s the beauty of music, he added. “there’s joy to be found in both listening and creating it.” ^{OMH}



Capital District Psychiatric Center



Photography: *Live Through This* - Making a Powerful Statement



Some of the participants in the *Live Through This* project.

"People who have survived attempts at suicide become chained to silence," said photographer, writer, and suicide-awareness activist Dese'Rae L. Stage. "They struggle because our society historically discriminates against them. I wanted to show what people who have been affected by mental health differences look like – and feel like."

Just Like You and Me

Stage's award-winning internet project, *Live Through This*, is a collection of portraits and self-told stories by survivors of suicide attempts – herself included. Stage found while tracking references in popular media that people who were considering suicide were most often portrayed as stereotypes and that the concept of suicide was treated as a joke. "We have a lot of ideas about what depression or other psychiatric disorders look like, but often they're not based in truth," she said.

Her project is intended to help remove the stigma of mental illness – and hopefully save lives. "We, as a culture, don't know how to discuss suicide. So we avoid it," Stage said. "Through the project, I wanted to show what living through it is like. I wanted to explore what happens next and I wanted it to be honest. I didn't want it to be hopeful in the *It Gets Better* sense, because life doesn't necessarily get better right away after a suicide attempt. It just gets different, and we have to learn to live with the reality that there is life afterward."



Dese'Rae L. Stage

Continued on the **next page**

Continued from the [previous page](#)

In-Depth Interview and Photo Session

Stage said her site is “intended to provide comfort to those who are down, insight to those who have trouble understanding suicidal thoughts and actions, catharsis for those who have lost a loved one, and the importance of lived experience to behavioral health providers and policymakers.”

Stage conducts in-depth interviews with participants, letting them tell their stories at their own pace. “I try not to interrupt—I prefer it to be as purely from the survivor’s perspective as possible,” she said.

“Survivors who share their stories are real people who have been through hell. But they’re also engaging, fascinating people whose voices deserve to be heard. It’s taken people a lot of courage to come to me, to be willing to attach a face to something that will live on the Internet forever. And I respect that.”

Afterward she takes a series of portraits, which are presented on the project website along with the survivor’s story. The website, the front page of which features portraits of all of the project’s participants, makes a powerful statement.

A Wider Audience

Stage found the audience for her work was much broader than she’d anticipated. Besides other survivors of suicide attempts, her site has drawn the interest of behavioral health professionals, families and friends of survivors, and with people who have lost a family member or friend to suicide. It’s being discussed in seminars and taught in social work programs.

Stage has been asked to speak at universities and at professional and academic conferences nationwide. She has discussed her work in various national media and has received awards from New York 1 News and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. She is also collaborating with researchers on a qualitative program of study on suicide attempt survivors, a field that has yet to be fully explored.

The *Live Through This* project has also created its own community. “It’s brought people together. I’m still in contact with most of the people I’ve interviewed. And they’re in contact with each other – giving each other support. Friendships have grown from this community, as well as some relationships.”

Even more rewarding is the fact that this experience has given many of the participants the strength they needed to become outspoken suicide-awareness activists in their own communities. “It’s been amazing to see a group of people who had been labelled as dangerous to themselves recover and reach out to help others.”



Stage at work.



For information on Live Through This, visit: <http://livethroughthis.org>.

On the Stage: The Value of Putting One's Self 'Out There'

The acts of examining one's self through dramatic action or building confidence through public performance can offer valuable experience on the path to recovery. They can engage the creative process, spark the imagination, and open one up to exploring numerous possibilities.

Enacting Parts of One's Life Through Psychodrama

Psychodrama is a form of therapy that makes use of this process, using guided dramatic action to examine an individual's problems or issues. When working with group issues, the term "sociodrama" is used. It was created in the early 1900s in Vienna by Dr. Jacob Moreno, through a theater company called the "Theater of Spontaneity," which used improvisation to encourage spontaneity and creativity. He later brought this practice to New York City. Moreno was the first person who used the term group therapy and many consider psychodrama to be the original form of group therapy.

"Psychodrama can be a powerful means of healing the past, practicing for the present and imagining the future," said Rebecca Walters, Co-Director with Judy Swallow of Hudson Valley Psychodrama of Highland. The program, which has been in operation since 1989, provides professional training for working with individuals, couples, families and groups.

A typical session is centered on a "protagonist," essentially the "star" of the production, whose story or issue will be re-enacted. Other group members will assume the roles of significant others and any audience will represent the world at-large.

A trained psychodramatist serves as the director, guiding participants through the session, intervening to ask questions, warming people up to the action, helping the group choose what to focus on, setting up the scenes and putting interventions into action, helping the protagonist take a deeper look at their lives and find ways to become more spontaneous.

A key element of psychodrama is action. "People will remember things far more effectively when their learning is accompanied by action," Walters said. By participating in the drama, the protagonist is living through the issue in real time and can stop and analyze their thoughts and responses.

One technique that has been used successfully is to have people who are in a dispute take on the other's role, so that they can understand the other's concerns. Another is to set up three chairs – one for the Wise Mind, the second for the Reasonable Mind, and the third for the Emotional Mind. While sitting in each chair, the participant can respond only in that state of mind, moving back and forth between them to get a clearer picture of where their response is coming from.

"Psychodrama allows for the safe expression of strong feelings," Walters said. "It offers an opportunity for a participant to step and gain back a wider perspective on their problems and an opportunity to test out solutions. It helps them re-examine their world in a new way."

Reaching At-Risk Youth Through Theater

For the past three years, young people in the day treatment and inpatient programs at the New York City Children's Center (NYCCC) and New York City Public School 23 in Queens (PS 23Q) have been learning about theater – and about themselves – through the Shubert Foundation/MTI Broadway Junior Program.

Through the Broadway Junior program, the students experienced all aspects of producing a Broadway musical – singing, acting, dancing, stage management, and costume and set design. All activities took place as part of an after-school program. Starting in December, the students practiced two times per week. School staff worked with students on raising funds, sewing costumes, and building sets.

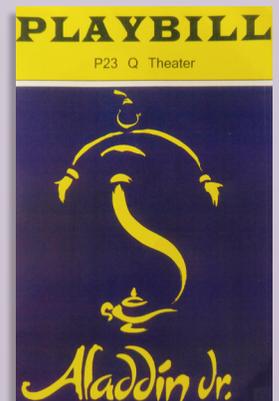
Performances were in the auditorium at the NYCCC campus and – for one final, thrilling show – on the stage of the Shubert Theater on Broadway. The group performed *School House Rock* in 2014, *Matilda* in 2015, and *Aladdin Jr.* this past spring. The *Aladdin Jr.* cast performed



A session at Hudson Valley Psychodrama.



For information on Hudson Valley Psychodrama, visit: <http://hvpi.net>.



Continued from the [previous page](#)

three musical numbers from the show for OMH Commissioner Ann Sullivan and her staff, who were visiting the facility at the time.

“It’s been an extremely positive experience for the young people,” said Jacqueline Jones, PS 23Q Principal. “Some of our students who have behavioral health problems have learned self-control, other students who have selective mutism gained the courage to speak and sing on stage, and all of the students have learned to handle responsibility.”

“Most important,” Jones added, “this experience has helped to build students’ confidence. This is something they want to do. They want to participate!”

Have You Heard the One About Stand-Up Comedy?

“The entire focus of the program is on how stand-up comedy can be used to help fight the stigma around mental illness and how the process of performing can help individuals,” said Joseph W. Swinford, Deputy Director of the OMH Office of Consumer Affairs.

Swinford was one of the participants in a *Stand-Up For Mental Health* program during the 2013 annual conference of the New York Association Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services.

Stand-Up For Mental Health is a project of stand-up comic David Granirer. Having found comedy to provide relief from his own depression, Granirer developed the course to help teach mental health consumers a means of working through their problems by developing a stand-up comedy routine, and then performing it in public. Although the program isn’t intended as therapy, it’s helped participants overcome depressions and phobias, and increase their confidence and self-esteem.

“We use comedy to give mental health consumers a powerful voice and help reduce the stigma and discrimination around mental illness,” Granirer said. “Seeing people with mental illness do it forces the audience to re-evaluate their perceptions of and prejudices against people who have mental health issues. The idea is that laughing at our setbacks raises us above them. It makes people go from despair to hope, and hope is crucial to anyone struggling with adversity.”

Stand Up For Mental Health has presented performances throughout the nation at association conferences, treatment centers, psychiatric wards, for various mental health organizations, corporations, government agencies, on college and university campuses, and most importantly, for the general public.

Granirer, who is based in Vancouver, BC, first works with participants via Skype. “He worked with us in groups and individually,” Swinford said. “He first taught us how to structure our jokes. We each came up with about three to five minutes worth of material and he worked with us to develop and polish out routines.” Swinford has given numerous presentations on behalf of OMH in the past, so he was no stranger to standing up in front of an audience. “I usually try to put in a little bit of humor to prevent my presentation from being too dry,” he said. “But I’d never had to deliberately make an audience laugh.”

Alone on stage, equipped with only a microphone and some index cards, Swinford performed his routine. Swinford said principle for determining success was simple: “If you make them laugh, it worked. If you don’t, it didn’t.”

As part of their preparation, Granirer taught participants how to change their tactic and shift to another topic, and how to respond to hecklers.

Fortunately for Swinford, the crowd was friendly. OMH



David Granirer



For information on Stand Up For Mental Health, visit: <http://standupformentalhealth.com>.