



Play aims to break silence, spark discussion about eating disorders

By Amy Anderson (published: March 26, 2009)

PORTLAND — A socially charged and emotionally moving play about a teenager with an eating disorder will be performed for Freeport High School students on April 1 to illuminate eating disorders and how they affect individuals, their families, friends and communities.

The national touring production of “The Thin Line” is a one-woman, 30-minute play about Ellen, a teenager with an eating disorder. Actress Amanda Huotari portrays Ellen, Ellen’s best friend, her mother and the disease itself. The production shows audiences the symptoms associated with eating disorders, and helps to promote prevention and intervention strategies.

Written by Cathy Plourde in 1998, the play has been touring for nine years under the direction of Add Verb Productions, based in Portland. Plourde also wrote “You the Man,” a play about domestic violence. The two plays have been presented at colleges, high schools, middle schools, community centers and national conferences in 36 states.

It will be performed at the Freeport Performing Arts Center thanks to donations from Jeff Zachau of Zachau Construction, Bow Street Market and Bath Savings Institution.

Plourde said “The Thin Line” started as the girl’s story and her journey, but developed to encompass the lives of those around her.

“This is such a complex issue,” Plourde said. “‘The Thin Line’ is a way to help the community create a climate that makes it OK to talk about (eating disorders). It has less to do with the individual and what they can do, and more about what the community can do to be stronger and better connected to their resources to help those in need.”

Add Verb Productions’ mission is to spark community understanding of social issues through theater, creative expression and dialogue. Plourde said the name of the non-profit organization Add Verb is about “adding the action” to an issue.

“Name the problem and get help,” she said. “The longer a friend or family member waits, the longer the person who needs help can get treatment and the longer it will take for them to recover.”

According to the National Eating Disorders Association, as many as 10 million women and 1 million men have eating disorders. But because of the secrecy that cloaks the disease, many cases are not reported. Statistics show that 81 percent of 10-year-old children are afraid of being fat, according to the NEDA, and 42 percent of first- and third-grade girls want to be thinner. Eating disorders, the group says, have the highest fatality rate in the United States.

Plourde, the first person to receive a master’s degree in Theater and Social Change in the country, said presenting theatrical activism is an “artistic challenge” that always strives to answer the question “so what?”

“Everyone knows domestic abuse and eating disorders exist,” she said. “We do not want to be too didactic, or oversimplify, or be too linearly prescriptive in our portrayal of each social issue. Revisions to that first production of ‘The Thin Line’ took the ‘so what’ factor into account, and at Add Verb, we use it as a litmus test for future productions.”

Amanda Bailey, Add Verb's operations director, said there are different levels and manifestations of eating disorders. She said in addition to anorexia, bulimia and binge eating, orthorexia nervosa, a disorder characterized by excessive organic or healthy eating, and excessive exercising are also common forms of the mental illness.

"Eating disorders can go undetected and under the radar in schools and communities," she said. "This production puts it out there and gets people to talk about it openly."

Bailey said discussions surrounding eating disorders continue long after the play is performed. She said in many schools students find the will to reach out and ask for help.

"The goal is not the performance," Bailey said. "The goal is to start a dialog and conversation within the community. This is an opportunity to take away the silence, to break that silence."

To help Freeport High School's student body process the information portrayed in "The Thin Line," there will be an audience question-and-answer session with local specialist and social worker Ida O'Donnell, high school health and physical education teacher Nancy Drolet, and school nurse Barbara Chisholm.

Drolet she and members of the faculty have experienced students or friends with eating disorders.

"We've all known someone who has struggled with this," she said. "It is a difficult disease because it is a mental disorder associated with control issues, obsessive compulsive tendencies and lack of self esteem."

Although eating disorders are difficult to identify and even more difficult to talk about, Drolet said the production will be a positive way to expose the truth.

"We will never know the impact we can have in someone's life until we try to reach out," she said.

O'Donnell is the founder and program director of the Art of Awareness Wellness Center in South Portland. A licensed clinical social worker for nearly 20 years, she specializes in eating disorders and trauma. She was a member of the panel last year when "The Thin Line" was performed at Catherine McAuley High School.

"Eating disorders are not about food," she said. "It's about a disordered sense of self, and often the need for approval and comfort."

O'Donnell said the play does a great job of outlining the disease without minimizing the severity of the condition. She said the play is honest and effective.

Plourde said the play has the ability to "plant seeds" in the audience.

"This play is not an end, it is only the beginning," she said. "It starts the process of the community lining itself up to be supportive."

- FYI: There are 15 to 20 seats available for the public for the April 1 production of "The Thin Line" in Freeport. To make a reservation, call Add Verb Productions at 771-1167. For more information, visit addverbproductions.com.

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