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Theater-based project helps kids use drama to identify and sort through personal issues

BY JANET KLOCKENGA • JKLOCKEN@DMREG.COM • JULY 30, 2009

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A local group is using drama to help build self-esteem, strengthen problem-solving skills and improve social interaction in young people.

Annie Mielke and Joe Parrish founded Adventures in Social Drama in April 2007 as a series of theater-based workshops for individuals with autism and related conditions. The group now has branched out and works with other children not touched by autism.

Members are working on an eight-week project, "Theatre for Social Change," sponsored in part by Bravo Greater Des Moines in collaboration with Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Iowa and Girl Scouts of Greater Iowa. The production, a series of vignettes written by the young participants, will be presented at 6:30 p.m. Aug. 14 at the Des Moines Social Club, 1408 Locust St.



JANET KLOCKENGA/DES MOINES REGISTER Joe Parrish, a founder of Adventures in Social Drama, a theater group for children, works with members Stacia Taylor and Gloria Casillas, both 11 and of the city's east side, as they rehearse scenes for a production at the Des Moines Social Club. The organization focuses on problem-solving solutions and dramatic social exploration so kids can develop artistic expression and self-awareness.



JANET KLOCKENGA/the REGISTER From left, Whitnee Cason, 10, and Gloria Casillas, 11, both of the city's east side, with Annie Mielke, founder of Adventures in Social Drama, and Girl Scout leader Cassie Schmitz as they rehearse.

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The program is made possible in part by a \$1,000 grant from Bravo Greater Des Moines. About eight girls who are members of a Girl Scout troop that meets at the Levitt Boys and Girls Club of Des Moines are involved in the production.

On a recent weekday afternoon, three girls were rehearsing scenes they had written, taken from real incidents in their lives. The vignettes revolved around issues of bullying, dealing with hurt feelings and treating others with respect. After the actors completed a sketch, they replayed it, using more positive behavior to change the outcome for the better.

Working with them were Mielke, Parrish and their Scout leader, Cassie Schmitz.

Parrish works as an autism associate at The Homestead in Pleasant Hill, which provides services and programs for children and adults with autism. He said that dramatic role-playing is an effective way to sort out personal issues.

"Theater can be used as a tool to diagnose a problem; you have a chance to replay it, to make it right," said Parrish. "You as a director can sit back and you get to let the anger go. You get to be free of that trauma. At this age, it's really important to work with girls on that. Females will internalize anger."

"This way, they're learning to deal with it in a more productive way," said Schmitz.

"Each plays their own scenes, and each is an episodic memory," Mielke said. "They get to role-play that scene and act it out."

Mielke and Parrish met several years ago when they were both acting in productions at the Des Moines Playhouse. Mielke wanted to use her skills in theater to help kids with social skills; she has two children who are on the autism spectrum.

"The need is great, because of the severity of violence you see today in schools," said Parrish. "We need to get to those kids with another means. We need to reach kids through what they know, and entertainment is

Adventures in Social Drama

To learn more or to sign up for classes, visit www.asdrama.org or contact co-founder Annie Mielke at annie.mielke@asdrama.org, 306-0030, or 5201 Merced St., Des Moines, IA, 50310.

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the most powerful venue. Using the creative process, they can role-play scenes. It's interactive."

Mielke and Parrish hope to take their programs to Des Moines schools, perhaps working with teachers and administrators to train school personnel in some of their techniques.

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


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