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Improv, role-playing techniques help students work through trauma, challenging social situations

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In the hallway at Chatham Academy, John Brennan, co-founder of Front Porch Improv, directs a scene of an imaginary bully picking on "Billy" in an imaginary classroom.

During the scene, Brennan and the students role play. Michael Missroon, 13, portrays Billy, while others act as bullies and bystanders. Brennan stands by as the "teacher," who has his back to students while writing on an imaginary chalkboard, is disrupted by students making noises.

When the teacher turns to find out what's going on, the other students in class blame Billy.

"It wasn't me," cries Missroon.

And scene.

Brennan breaks the fourth wall and offers a teaching moment about how to best handle a situation like that in real life. They regroup, step back into their roles, and demonstrate how best to handle the situation.

This time, another student sticks up for Billy in front of the classroom and tells the truth to the teacher.



"That was awesome," Brennan said. His deep, booming voice infused with enthusiasm is infectious and the kids are happy with the results. It's not an after-school special or drama club rehearsing for a play, but kids learning how to cope with their emotions through reading a room and being in the moment.

Later, Brennan explained this exercise speaks to the goal of the program: using improvisation and role-playing to develop skills in self-awareness and decision-making in tough situations. Most people think improv is making something out of nothing, Brennan said, but it really is maximizing the resources. He said sometimes that can be working with yourself.

“Instead of you suppressing emotions, you actually recognize things, instead of getting mad and figure out what you can do,” he said.

Yes, and ...

During the weekends, Brennan along with Front Porch Improv co-founder Brianne Halverson, leads a group of rowdy players from a black-box theater tucked away on Victory Drive.

During the weekdays, Brennan and Halverson switch gears to teach a variety of improv workshops at corporate retreats, for aspiring actors, and area children to help them work through childhood trauma and other mental health issues



Through ACTS, or Adolescents and Children Transforming Savannah, workshops, specially trained improvisational professionals work with children to address the fraught emotional landscapes of bullying, abuse, neglect, racism, gender identity, and learning disabilities. They tackle everything from test anxiety to replacing anger responses with constructive conversation.

The toll taken by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns exacerbated an already burgeoning adolescent mental health crisis spiked with isolation, anxiety, and learning gaps.

According to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2021 more than a third (37 percent) of high school students have experienced mental health during the pandemic. Another 44 percent of students felt a sense of hopelessness or sadness.

Halverson explained that the Trauma Drama approach follows a model pioneered by a Boston, Massachusetts-based psychiatrist who studied the trauma-drama cycle of people experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. Dr. Bessel van de Kolk found that by engaging the body he could help alleviate the brain's addiction to the trauma.

"When we started the workshops with the first responders' children we were working from a hunch," Halverson said. "We knew from personal experience how helpful improv had been for us — exploring emotions, building resiliency through trial and error, being able to embody characters and situations outside our own experience, building social emotional awareness, role playing different scenarios... We had seen how youth responded positively but it was all anecdotal."



Halverson said someone suggested she look into the work of Dr. Joseph Spinazzola, who founded the Trauma Drama program, which uses an evidence-based curriculum designed to integrate the core components of complex trauma intervention with youth and adolescents.

“The goal is not performance; the goal is mental health,” Halverson said.

In the early stages of the pandemic, Halverson contacted Vira Salzburn, who serves as Program Director for the Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council.

In her role, Salzburn had worked in youth and suicide prevention, but she wanted to help children of first responders cope with anxiety. She secured \$10,000 as part of a Community Partnership Grant from the city of Savannah.

"This a marriage between therapy and improvisational theater," Salzburn said, adding that the improv workshops help children build empathy and communication skills, as well as step out of their comfort zones.



Those first ACTS workshops, held in June 2020 with first responders' children, Halverson said, kept the children's minds occupied, so they wouldn't have to deal with the pressures their parents were facing during the pandemic.

Since then, Front Porch Improv has worked with teens who were experiencing homelessness, had endured domestic abuse, or had experienced physical violence. FPI has also held improv workshops for children who are part of Loop It Up, Park Place, Safe Shelter, Youth Intercept, and with Savannah-Chatham schools.

A typical workshop

The middle school kids Brennan worked with on the day Savannah Morning News watched and listened attended Chatham Academy at Royce Learning

Center, founded in 1978 to educate students with learning disabilities, ADHD and other specialized needs.

Thirteen-year-old Cate Shariff said she joined the improv classes "as a way to work on my stuttering."

Missroon said the workshops inspired him to join a local youth theater group in Savannah. He said acting allows him to be someone else.

"It's not really just acting for me when I do plays. It's more of, like, also expressing how I felt," he said. `

He said it has helped him to control his emotions and not to get as mad.



"Well, one time at Children's Theater people were making fun of something that I liked and I said it's not cool to talk about that," he said. "If I didn't have improv, I probably would have acted in a different way."

Chatham Academy's Head of School Laci Culbreath said she has seen her students go from feeling down to finding their voices. She also said the workshop allows the students to step away from the computer and regain the social skills that were lost because of the pandemic.

"It helps them release energy, it helps them put themselves in somebody else's shoes that helps them to relate to their peers better," she said.

Deshawn Mason, one of Front Porch's veterans, agrees. He likes to see the students blossom. "The thing that really strikes me as the program progresses through the weeks, we get to watch the students unfold a little bit."

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