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Second Step Players gently battle stigma of mental illness

By Brenda Sullivan - ReminderNews
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The Second Step Players perform what they call 'conscious comedy' sketches both to share their gifts and battle the stigma of a mental health diagnosis with education and laughter. Performing in this sketch about Santa's reindeer, at Manchester Community College are (l-r) Becca Atkins, Sam Bliven and Bill Paillunas. Photo by Brenda Sullivan.

"I've been given 19 diagnoses - hopefully, one of them is right," said Dylan Croft, a member of the Second Step Players whose traveling troupe gave an often funny and thoroughly entertaining performance at Manchester Community College on Jan. 17.

The afternoon event, sponsored by MCC's Organization of Active Adults, drew a full house and included comedy sketches written by the players, as well as poetry and song.

The performance group is part of Artreach, a Norwich-based organization that promotes co-creativity as part of recovery for

adults with mental health diagnoses.

The Second Step Players take that work out into the community not only to share their gifts, but to gently prod their audiences to reconsider their stereotypes and help remove the stigma attached to a mental health diagnosis.

Their performances are followed by each actor sharing his or her diagnoses - including bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic-stress disorder (PTSD), attention deficit disorder (ADD), anxiety and depression - and then inviting the audience to ask questions.

The MCC performance kicked off with stand-up comedy from Sam Bliven, who found plenty of material in his hospital experiences. He joked, "You know you've been in the psych ward too long if when you eat a bag of M&Ms, you swallow one at a time with a glass of water."

Bliven also was rewarded with applause for his Boris Karloff impression done to the song, "The Monster Mash," which he recreated as the "The Psych Ward Dash."

Bill Palilunas, who shared his diagnoses of depression, OCD and PTSD, also performed a stand-up routine and joked that he has such low self-esteem, "I once refused a Facebook 'friend' request from myself."

Poems shared by members who are also part of the Artreach writing group spoke of their struggles as well as a deep appreciation of the natural world. A line from one poem, "The Rose Garden," describes "the wine-colored scent, the true noise of joy" found in this garden.

Among the musical moments was a performance by Barbara Stanley, whose song touched on the sometimes grim humor of OCD... "Do my hands need washing, or is it just me?"

What the group calls "conscious comedy" also included sketches that playfully addressed learning to enjoy working as a team in which everyone's contributions are valued, and not losing sight of the big picture when faced with people who focus on the negative.

During the question and answer session at the end of the program, several audience members asked what they could do to help people in their lives who have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder.

"Having other people know that my diagnosis doesn't define me, it's just a symptom," said Becca Atkins, whose diagnoses include depression.

She and others also talked about the problems with medical professionals who often fail to

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properly diagnosis or treat physical illnesses after they're informed of their patient's mental health diagnosis.

"I know of someone who had cancer for two years and the doctors didn't see it because they were looking at her only as someone with a mental illness," Barbara Stanley said.

Another question was how to encourage a loved one to continue taking his or her medications.

Instead of pressuring the loved one, Atkins said, try and be a kind of mirror. "You might say something like, 'It seems like you're not feeling as well as you were three weeks ago. Is something happening?'"

Melanie Nagode added, "Don't shame them... just show your undying love and appreciation and let them know when they're better."

The Second Step Players perform throughout Connecticut, as well as in other parts of the country, with the sponsoring group paying for their transportation.

More information about joining this group, or participating in any of the other Artreach artistic development groups - which are open to all community members over age 18 - can be found on the website <http://artreachheals.org>.

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