

## Portland's PlayWrite program helps troubled kids write to heal

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The words come from young people, challenged to bring emotional conflicts to life. Then professional actors such as Grace Shapiro (left) and Cecily Overman perform the students' original work. PlayWrite workshops are a two-week process, and what happens during that time often matters as much as what ends up on stage.

A piece of butcher paper taped to the wall spells out the purpose of this particular workshop: "To look at the beliefs we have about ourselves ... and others."

It isn't until much later that this really registers with me.

I've come to watch a very specific kind of playwriting workshop offered to young people who have found themselves in a difficult place because maybe they've run away from home, or they don't learn the way other kids learn, or they've been abused or abandoned, forgotten, neglected. Maybe they cut themselves -- thin angry lines that scream when they expose the soft undersides of their arms. Maybe they drink too much, or chase drugs compulsively. Maybe they've spent time in jail. Maybe they struggle with depression or another mental illness. For some it's not so extreme; maybe they just feel out of step with the rest of the world. Whatever it is, they're in a different place than most young people their age.

Someone -- a teacher, a counselor, a therapist -- has suggested that they sign up for this thing called PlayWrite. Even if they haven't heard of PlayWrite, they're probably familiar with the hope implicit in these sorts of programs, of which there are many, all offered with the same sweet fervor, by Sincere Adults: That doing something creative -- whether it's photography or poetry or painting or writing -- can provide both refuge and release.

Another word that tends to get used a lot is transformation.

But transformation is a tricky concept. It implies something final, triumphant, measurable. Complete. It also puts all the emphasis on a single tangible result -- what gets made, what gets done; all that happens between a curtain's rise and fall -- when the process itself is often far more compelling -- the hundreds of tiny crises, which we fail to see for what they are, until their aggregate threatens to overwhelm us: The young woman who goes for a cigarette break and simply keeps walking. The girl who, on another day in another place, spends three hours

engrossed in chipping all the yellow paint from a pencil with her thumbnail, until she reaches the raw wood underneath.

A few feet away from her, a classmate abruptly puts her head on the table and refuses to speak. Half an hour passes.

We're all waiting for the sound and the fury, the Big Result. But maybe it's really much simpler, much quieter:

A girl lifting her head off the table.

A flicker of eye contact through the veil of hair.

It happens so fast, you might miss it, if you weren't able to be there, as I am, sitting in the cafeteria of a secure residential treatment center in Southeast Portland for young women called Rosemont, run by Morrison Child and Family Services, a place where the doors lock behind us, where young women are sent when they are "troubled," as a flier in the lobby puts it, girls 12 to 17, the vast majority of whom report some kind of abuse. The flier goes on to list parental neglect, school failure, truancy, substance abuse, the Oregon Youth Authority, foster homes, repeated running away. There are psychiatrists and psychologists on staff, support groups for girls grappling with "individual needs" such as incest and depression.

I have been allowed inside Rosemont to watch the PlayWrite process, only after promising that I won't reveal any personal details that could identify the young women and that I won't interview them. Otherwise I am free to sit and observe what unfolds, without any filter.

And so I do. Each young woman pairs off with a PlayWrite coach. These adults, most of them professional actors, work very hard not to offer any answers, to gently coax the young people toward their own revelations through the creation of characters with a particular conflict.

It's a lot of questioning:

"What does that feel like?"

"Why would she do that?"

"How would you put that into words?"

In all, it's a two-week process -- workshops five days a week, three hours a day. The first week is designed to ease the students in, to develop trust. There are group activities that on the surface feel incredibly goofy -- lots of circling up, say your name, along with a crazy gesture; pass the energy! -- but you can see that, deep down, it's meant to get them to stop judging, to let go, to even be vulnerable if only for a moment, to try things they've never tried before. And they go there with it, after some embarrassed laughter, maybe some rolling of the kohl-smear eyes.

All practice, whether they realize it or not, for Week Two, when the one-on-one work starts, the actual writing with a coach. This is where the students are asked to examine and to give words to things that have never made any sense to them before, all those unanswered questions:

"Why would he leave?"

"Why would she say she loved you and still act that way?"

Not that what they write is autobiographical. In fact, in this process, they're asked to create a play using only non-human characters; one, an animal; the other an inanimate object. And it's strange, at first, to realize that the story you're hearing is about a pair of pants and a cheetah; a hibiscus flower and a coral on a reef; a toothbrush and a bird -- uncomfortable, awkward even; we are typically suspicious of anything too fantastical past a certain point in our lives. And yet, it occurs to me that the ability to make-believe requires you to feel a certain confidence, safety even; that to imagine other lives, other points of view, other worlds, other possibilities, means abandoning the rules you thought bound you to this one.

At the same time, while these students are asked to populate their play with characters who are not human, they're pushed to draw from their own lives to make these characters seem as authentic as possible. This is where it gets hard. Because sometimes, real feels too real.

On this particular day, the girls from Rosemont have just one more session in which to finish their plays, and a number of them buckle. Finding the words to express feelings is particularly painful; I imagine that there was a time when disconnecting from their feelings helped them survive.

Their frustrations mount.

"I don't know what to say. You write something."

"I can't. This is not my play. It's yours."

One young woman, talking animatedly with her coach, suddenly stops and begins crying without a sound, her face blotchy from the effort: "I feel like I'm being criticized."

Not far from her, the head drops: "I need space."

The pencil's scraped; chips of paint drift to the floor.

The coaches wait; sometimes, they get up and walk away for a bit.

But they always come back.

Then the questioning starts again, quietly, gently, but persistently.

"Why would your character say she can't take it anymore? What does that mean? What is she going to do now?"

The patience of the coaches is both astonishing and exhausting. It would be so much easier to help, to offer suggestions.

But it would also ruin the point, Grace Shapiro, an actress who has been coaching with PlayWrite for a little over a year now, explained to me later:

"They really think we have all the answers, and really we have no idea. You have to convince them, 'I really don't know what you're supposed to do, but I'm curious to know how your mind works. ... And I'm going to be here every day for you, whether you're here or not.' For a lot of the students, the fact that you're on time, every single day, just for them, has this effect we can probably never fully comprehend."

So many of the students have felt like people have quit on them in the past. "Not letting them quit," Shapiro says, becomes one of the most meaningful things the coaches can do.

So that when the young woman finally lifts her head from the table, it feels like a much bigger accomplishment.



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At the conclusion of a workshop held at New Avenues for Youth in Portland, according to PlayWrite tradition, students and coaches circle up to offer parting words to each other in the moments before the final performance. The coaches also present each student with a T-shirt and the notebooks containing everything each has done during that time.

**It embarrasses me to admit this**, but one of the things that struck me right away was how normal the girls at Rosemont look in their ballet flats and skinny jeans and tank tops (we could be in a small high school anywhere, save for the cameras and the constant presence of at least one key-holding staff member), because it implies that I had imagined the young women here would somehow be marked by what had happened to them, that the hurts we must bear are visible, when I know from my own life, as perhaps you know from yours, that this is not true (even as I have long worried otherwise).

This is the second rule on the piece of butcher paper taped to a workshop wall.

"Respect."

And it's about respecting others, certainly, but perhaps even more difficult, it's about respecting yourself, your ideas, refraining from judgment.

"Not criticizing yourself," Timothy Scarrott. says.

**Scarrott, an actor and PlayWrite coach**, is leading a workshop for students at New Avenues for Youth, which helps young people who are homeless or otherwise at risk. In addition to Rosemont and New Avenues, PlayWrite works with students from eight other alternative schools in the Portland area, including ChristieCare, Portland Night High School; last year they conducted 11 workshops, including two songwriting workshops, with eight schools.

Nine students have signed up for this particular New Avenues workshop; five show the first day, a number that everyone is pleased with because, unlike Rosemont, where PlayWrite was just a week ago, nothing holds these young people here. And then the cigarette break turns permanent; another young man leaves just a few minutes in.

The coaches say nothing, maintain that air of calm. (Grace tells me that this is one of the benefits of being an actor, being able to adapt to the moment, improvise.)

More surprising, in the end, are the students who keep coming back.

Everyone sits rapt, in rows of chairs, as though in a college class, dissecting a scene from "Death of a Salesman" that two of the coaches have just performed.

Why would Willy Loman tell a story about an old salesman he remembers who wore blue slippers?

"It must have been an important event in his life to remember it down to the color of the man's slippers -- for him to be carrying a detail like that around with him for 30 years," a 19-year-old sitting near the back says. His name is Gavin Workman, and he has been mostly quiet up to now, but clearly, he is bright and perceptive, able to articulate things in surprising and insightful ways. I suspect that he must write, and he tells me later that he does; that he has always written, for as long as he can remember, but until recently, he says, "I had never thought of myself as a writer, that it was something I could do."

He told me he had been looking forward to the workshop, to having someone mentor him, because he tended to struggle to finish things on his own. It surfaces in one of the first writing exercises with a coach when he wrestles so long over what needs to be just a few lines, conjured spontaneously, that he runs out of time.

"I have a lot more limitations than I realized I was imposing on myself," he says afterward.

Rule No. 2.

Respecting yourself; not criticizing yourself.

It just might be the hardest rule to follow.

**PlayWrite's executive director, Bruce Livingston** -- whose biography says he received his undergraduate degree from Reed and his graduate degree from the University of Chicago, who worked as an anthropologist in Iran for a number of years, who is the son of a neurosurgeon -- sends me e-mails; one, a paper he has written on the impact of PlayWrite, with footnoted references to academic papers from The Harvard Review of Psychology and The Journal of The American Medical Association.

I print it off.

Here is one of the sentences I underline:

"Over the 10 days of the workshop, supported by an empathetic, yet challenging coach, a student writer is often able to transform traumatic implicit memories into narratives. ..."

Remember what I said about the process being more compelling than the final finished product?

I take it back.

I can no longer separate all the back story from the content of the plays themselves.

Like when I arrive at Rosemont for the final performances and discover that everyone has in fact completed her play; watching as it dawns on the young women that professional actors will perform their work before the school; the way each of the girls' faces, no matter how impassive throughout the process, register genuine delight when they hear their words read aloud by the actors for the first time -- and the way they allow themselves that joy, however briefly, and don't try to choke it back or hide it.

It's the same for The New Avenues performance, which takes place at the Living Room Theaters in downtown Portland, where, in the end, six students -- including Gavin -- put on plays before friends, family and New Avenues staff. Even some of the students who dropped out show up to watch.

Gavin, whose work is funny, melancholy and allegorical, tells me afterward how good it felt to see his work put out there -- "rather than writing just for me" -- and that it looks like he will go to college in the fall.

"I went a lot of different places with my writing that I wouldn't have done by myself," he says. "I'm looking forward to continuing that."

At the first workshop, the students from New Avenues had all wanted to know basically the same thing:

"Do we get to stand up and take a bow?"

"Will people get to come and watch our plays?"

I know now why they asked.

It is tradition that immediately before final performances, coaches and students and actors circle up one last time. One by one each person says something to the group.

When Livingston, PlayWrite's executive director, asks if I will stand with them all at Rosemont, I balk at first, ready to invoke my role as observer, but something in his request makes me reconsider.

The girls are crying.

Again and again they say how grateful they are for the experience.

"The second week was so hard," says the young woman who had all but given up, head on the table. "But I'm glad I stuck with it because hearing what you think means so much to me."

"I'm full now ... in my heart," the young woman next to me says, through sobs. "I know myself now, through my characters."

Then it is my turn. I'm kind of raw and exposed without a notebook to hide behind, I say. And before I can help myself -- I am thinking about what it took for them to show that kind of vulnerability, what it took for them to face what had scared them so much -- I start to cry.

I thank the young women for letting me be there.

I thank them for their courage, the way they were able to take chaos and confusion, what felt so strange and painful to them, and turn it into something meaningful. Beautiful even.

And I'm talking about the plays, but I'm not.

I don't know if I could do what they have done.

But that's why I'm here, standing in this circle.

That's why I'm in the audience.

Because of you, Gavin, and the young women who I wish I could thank by name, but I hope you know who you are, I'm going to try.

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