



By Nancy Eichhorn

In a clinical world of diagnosable disabilities, there are those who create theories, those who propose methodologies, and those who ascribe to them. And then there are people who simply do what they do, intuitively, without knowing the science behind their actions.

I recently met such a couple, Michelle and Troy Wheeler. They founded Dream Theatre Inc., eight years ago in Roseville, California, as a year-round, full-time theater arts program for adults with disabilities (ages 18 to 64). The program was designed to instruct, develop and guide students with disabilities who want to become actors, musicians, dancers, visual artists and behind-the-curtain technicians.

While many day programs teach daily living skills, the Wheelers guide students in relationship building and maintenance with a focus on the social engagement skills necessary to facilitate them (i.e. inter and intrapersonal communication skills, self and co-affect regulation, trust, self-confidence, and more). Within the context of classes and annual performances, students learn how to be part of a working community that involves teamwork and personal responsibility.

“When our students enter our theater doors, they know there isn’t time to focus on ‘disabilities’—we all have our talents, our gifts to share, and ‘the show must go on,’” Michelle said during our recent interview at their Roseville theater. She added that along with her trainings and certifications, she is an artist and a dancer. She has performed in MTV videos and commercial ventures in New York. Troy is a photographer and musician (he plays guitar); he spent time performing in the Hollywood club circuit in L.A.

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I was drawn to their program because of all the talk about polyvagal theory, music and movement theory, and relational components in psychotherapy. After much reading, I believe that current neuropsychological theory supports the assertion that social engagement and social bonding are the building blocks to healthy relationships. Stephen W. Porges has shown via his Polyvagal Theory that our nervous system needs to feel safe to allow proximity and contact, and that appropriate touch takes part in establishing trusting social relationships. There is also ample evidence supporting the impact of music in psychotherapy as well as when working with children on the autistic spectrum. Music has the potential to stimulate both brain hemispheres rather than just one. Music also encourages communicative behaviors and interactions with others.

More specifically, singing and playing an instrument support cognitive activity that supports self-awareness and improved relationships. Singing it seems is rather amazing. According to Cassandra Sheppard, "When we sing our neurotransmitters connect in new and different ways. It fires up the right temporal lobe of our brain releasing endorphins that make us smarter, healthier, happier, and more creative. When we sing with other people this effect is amplified."

She also noted studies that demonstrated singing also releases oxytocin, which helps relieve anxiety and stress and is linked to feelings of trust and bonding. Singing helps people with depression and reduces feelings of loneliness, leaving people feeling relaxed, happy and connected. What's more, the benefits of singing regularly are cumulative. As for movement, I think its use in psychotherapy as been well documented and not necessary to say more here.

I was intrigued that the Wheeler's curriculum is clearly 'polyvagal informed' without any academic knowledge of Porge's research or currently identified and accepted biobehavioral and psychosocial influences in educational settings. It was refreshing to talk with them and their students and see their work in action.

In the Beginning

Before founding Dream Theatre, Michelle spent nine years working as an art teacher at a local day program for adults with disabilities. Early in her employment, she explained, she had noticed that a lot of clients worked with their head down, their eyes on the paper, focused on their drawing, their own projects.

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They were self-focused but not part of the community; there was no engagement with the person sitting beside them. She said the teachers played quiet music, that quiet was enforced; loud noise, talking was not encouraged.

"Many people thought, back then, that overstimulation would overwhelm people with disabilities. But there is a group of individuals who are highly functioning who need all that distraction. This group has all this energy," she said. "They were constantly getting into trouble at the center because they were not sitting quietly, not drawing alone; they wanted social engagement. I asked the program director if I could take a couple of the students on stage and just mess around with some theater arts stuff. I had this old Carpenters cassette tape, so we started learning how to sing their songs. I was teaching singing, then dancing. But the other teachers found our performance arts disruptive, so I found space for us over at the Veteran's Hall." Then, a new director appeared who didn't share Michelle's vision.

Welcome Dream Theater, Inc.

While the licensing and regulation requirements remained the same, the house rules changed. Noise was encouraged, social engagement supported and facilitated. And appropriate touch was allowed—the kind of touch that all human beings need in their lives—a pat on the back, a hands-up high-five for a job well done, a hug when you're crying so you know you're not alone.

"We wanted to create a safe haven," Michelle said, knowing full well the challenges that come with learning disabilities—she graduated high school with a third-grade math proficiency and a fourth-grade reading proficiency and had languished in learning disabled classes. Her childhood situation didn't help with abuse, neglect. She knows intuitively that being there, being present, comes first, and that the coming together of two minds in unpredictable ways allows both she and her students' affect states to evolve, for their feelings to be expressed in a safe context. However, at school and at

home, many caregivers bend for students with disabilities—giving allowances, an easy way out, Michelle said.

"We do the opposite," she said. "Things go wrong in live theater, and you have to learn to go with the flow, to support one another to make changes in the moment. We teach them that this is a safe place to freak out, but you have to get past it and move one."

Michelle shared a story about one student, a singer, who used to have out-of-control 'autistic' tantrums when the music abruptly stopped. His goal was to sing in a band, but he couldn't even begin to audition with his 'fits and tantrums'. During a live show, the music stopped, and he started throwing a fit on stage. He was saying things like, 'Now there's not going to be a show, we'll have to cancel it.' Michelle was trying to calm him down, let him know it will be okay when the other students on stage started telling him jokes.

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They were using laughter to help him calm himself down. Michelle shared that while he wasn't 'happy', he was laughing, and the show did go on. Today, she said, he only gets upset one or two times a month. "People ask me why I let him scream like that when he does, and I say, 'He used to do it five times a day every day for 8 years, now its every its every once in a while, he's making progress.'"

In another instance, a student's father had passed away on a Friday, and on the following Monday she wanted to come back. But she was clear with the Wheelers that she might be upset. Michelle had said, "Yes, you will be, and you can still come in and work. And if you need some time to yourself, you can have private space in the conference room." She then explained that had this young woman spent several hours crying, unable to function, they would have sent her home because adults cannot go to work and spend the day lost in tears and grief, a truth in our real adult world.

Another student, she said, never spoke with anyone in the grocery store when he went shopping with his mother. Now, he makes eye contact and asks the baggers and checkers, How's your day? These students are learning how to ask other people what their feelings are (something unusual for those on the autistic spectrum). And they are learning how to take care of each other, that there are things you can and cannot say in work related environments, and things

you can and cannot do.

Watching a Program Rehearsal

Per psychological classifications, persons with disabilities often display the following observable deficits: lack of prosody; poor eye contact; blunted facial expressivity; difficult behavioral regulation: impulsive, anxious, hypoarousal; compromised vagus nerve; learning difficulties; difficulty following conversations, listening; sound sensitivity; and oral motor issues.

Spending time during a recent rehearsal for their 16th annual Winter fundraising performance, I concluded that audiences would be hard pressed to know that these students are "coded" be it: Down's Syndrome, Autism, Asperger's, Cerebral Palsy, or fetal alcohol syndrome. Some are officially noted as developmentally disabled, and/or intellectually delayed, and for many there are concurrent conditions such as sight, hearing, and behavioral challenges.

Entering the actual theater, watching the students perform, I felt this positive abundance of energy. There's a comradery here that has evolved with time and trust, with laughter and tears, with resiliency and perseverance. The students know they're safe to be who they are—self-expression is valued—and to appreciate others for who they are. When they exited the stage after a showcase of three Christmas carols, the students approached me, hands

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outstretched to shake my hand, share their name, say hello. They were engaged and engaging me. 'Stephanie' shared that she had joined the program seven years ago. She was part of the drama group at her local high school and wanted to pursue a career in the theater arts after graduation. When asked why she continues year after year, she said, "The amazing training in general, and the performances; we make people happy with the shows that we do."

'Nick' told me that he initially came to the theater program a year ago because he promised a dear friend he would check it out. And now, a year later, he shared, "I have good friends, it feels like home here."

Students often learn about the Dream Theatre from the annual performances. All high school students, from Auburn to Sacramento, who are coded with disabilities, are invited to free shows while ticket-holder- events run on separate days. The first year, as disabled students came in wheel chairs, one student arrived on a gurney. Michelle shared that the caretaker said, "We'll sit out here in the other room, he will make noise, disrupt the show."

Michelle was like, wait a minute: "These 'guys' may yell, they may make noise, they may not clap at the right time or laugh at our jokes but that's okay because that's how they are. Our guys understand that. Many disabled students can't go to a regular theater. Many are not even allowed in their churches; they have to go to special religious programs. A goal of mine is to have an all-inclusive space, where all are involved. They are welcome to sing along, have fun and feel good here."

Students also come by way of their case workers through the Alta California Regional

Center (ACRC), a private non-profit corporation that works under the direction of the State of California Department of Developmental services to provide services to people (ages 3 and up) with developmental disabilities pursuant the Lanterman Act (<https://www.altaregionall.org/about-us>).

The Nuts and Bolts

The Wheelers dug into their savings and borrowed money to start their theater program. The space was renovated to include an office and work room upstairs; the main theater, a kitchen, dance studio, conference room, and bathrooms downstairs. All wall edges are rounded. The floors are heated. The color scheme and lighting comforting. There's a sense of warmth, a sense of calm wakefulness that allows creativity to exist. The students and teachers are free and safe to play; they can let go of certainties and enter modes of improvisation that are far more emotionally enriching than constriction, control, and fear.

"I work with clients directly," Michelle said. "I'm counselor, mom, grandma." Troy manages the business end. Together they write the shows and put them on (Michelle paints the scenery, makes costumes, does all the make up etc.). They have one paid administrator and three part-time teachers, who Michelle trains.

"We have a skinny staff, so all students pitch in," Michelle said. "There's no sit-down time. Students are not allowed to just sit and zone out in their own personal world; they cannot

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they cannot isolate themselves. There's a lot to do to create a show."

One young man, who works with the sound boards, has an incredible memory according to Michelle. After a performance, having moved the boards from place to place, all the wires had been disconnected. There were no schematics for putting it back



together; this young man did it by memory. It turns out his father did not allow him to use the VCR at home, afraid he'd break it. During a performance, Michelle brought the father over to see his son working the complicated sound board quite confidently. "Do you see this?" she asked, with a soft tone, a sense of see how competent your son is, then added, "I suggest you let your son use the VCR."

When they are not in "show mode", students spend six hours a day, five-days a week attending seminars. The day is divided into three segments with nine ongoing classes to select from. There are vocals (singing, choir, solo, speaking), song writing, dance and movement, technology, make up, scenery design and more. At the end of the day, students are on stage performing. 'Marty' shared that he writes his own music and wants to get it out to the world. His classes and the performances at Dream Theatre "build up my confidence," he said. 'Star', who jokingly said she's been here forever (it's been 8 years), is expressive, engaging, her movements on stage and in one-to-one conversation are animated, alive. She said that she likes it here "because it feels like family here. I

have nice friends, people get along."

All students come with personal goals and individual learning plans. The students choose goals, such as learning breathing skills to enhance vocal ability, hold notes longer etc. Michelle explained that their goals involve what they believe they need to be more resourceful and then she adds in

problem-solving abilities (both in relationships and in concrete situations) and skills to listen and follow directions. "Being willing to follow directions is a must—it's critical in any work situation. In any theater job they have to do what the director tells them (*within safety and reason of course*) even if they're are not happy about it all the time," Michelle said.

Despite the positive outcomes for these students, funding continues to be an issue.

The Wheelers are paid for daily attendance and are assigned 30 students a day; they are licensed for 45. More students would allow their program to be financially viable allowing them to hire another teacher, raise their pay rate and offer benefits. According to Michelle, the State of California no longer wants to fund day programs. The new focus is on community immersion and job training. Dream Theatre is already positioned to meet these new parameters, and Michelle is looking at ways to expand real life experiences, such as inviting talent agents to come so students can showcase their talents.

For those interested in learning more about starting a program in your area, visit www.DTROCKS.ORG

To listen in on the rehearsal, click [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). Each video is about 2 minutes in duration.