

Local approach to children's mental health awareness inspires new Optimist Club

By Chris Montanini, Londoner
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Haley Schlotzhauer (left) takes part in a video short with puppeteers Andy Hayward, Frank Meschkuleit and (hidden) Gord Robertson. (Photo submitted)

A lack of children's mental health resources is motivating Londoner Paula Jesty to create her own, but she isn't alone on her mission to educate local families about the importance of early intervention.

A former local television producer, Jesty has since moved on to a career in partnership development. More recently, she has been using both of these skills to establish a unique children's mental health awareness organization called M.I. understanding.

The M.I. stands for mental illness. The organization, founded by Jesty about four years ago, is focused on producing kid-friendly mental health exhibits and web-based video shorts to build awareness and empathy for children's mental health issues.

"The real focus ... is to create a community support for families dealing with mental health," Jesty said. "Our target audience is kids under 12 with ... our focus being the importance of early intervention."

The topic is one she's familiar with. Jesty said she's often inspired by her earliest experiences with children's mental health issues, something her family faced when her sister began showing signs of mental illness early in her life.

"It certainly impacted our family every step of the way," she said. "As a family we were taught to support her and be understanding; we certainly changed the way we did things in order to make it easier for her."

"Getting older and having children of my own and being in a community in (Wortley Village) where I'm surrounded by families, I recognize that for a lot of families, the stigma around mental health ... is not only keeping them from getting support for their kids ... but it also was really impacting their relationship with their community and with their kids."

You may have come across an M.I. understanding presentation in a local school or the London Children's Museum, but Jesty has made a lot of progress over the past four years.

The organization's newest project is a series of short videos featuring professional puppeteers Andy Hayward (Elmo's Christmas Countdown), Frank Meschkuleit (Toopy and Bino), and Gord Robertson (Zoboomafoo). A pilot is currently available on their website and five videos in total — one each for five different types of anxiety, including obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) — are expected to be ready by the middle of the month.

"We're respectful of the anxiety in this case but at the same time, we have fun with it," Jesty explained. "What we found is whether it was adults, whether it was children, whether it was teen groups, whenever we showed these videos, hands go up and people are able to talk about it. The resounding answer is, if a (puppet) dog and chicken can talk about it, so can I."

Jesty's new project has also received a lot of support through important partnerships, her other specialty.

Nine graduates of Fanshawe College's Contemporary Media program worked as cast and crew. Scripts were developed with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Care Program at Children's Hospital, London Health Sciences Centre, Thames Valley District School Board's Mental Health Task Force and Fanshawe College. Three local charities provided funds for the project: Gerald C. Baines Foundation, The Agape Foundation of London and Westminster College Foundation.

"We really wanted to make sure we were doing it properly," Jesty said, adding that children's mental health has become less difficult to pitch to potential partners over the past four years. "We wanted to make sure the information was vetted through the proper resources and we wanted to make sure we were coming up with a product that was going to help the people that needed it."

Jesty's project also inspired Ed and Ruth Edwards, a couple of long-time members of the Southwestern Ontario Optimists. Convinced by evidence suggesting early intervention can successfully help kids overcome mental illness, the pair has started The Kids Mental Health Optimist Club of Canada, the first of its kind among the organization's 78 clubs across the region.

"We are selfishly wanting to learn as much from (M.I. understanding) as we can so we can take that information and build it into optimist programs so each club can feel comfortable that they're doing what we hope is their number one fundamental purpose, and that is get rid of the stigma of children's mental health," Ed said.

"A lot of people we run into, whether it's a grandchild or a neighbour, there is so much ... anxiety today and it just seems so prevalent that we had to do something," Ruth added. "It's all (Jesty), we just found a way to get it out there and get more people involved."

Reaching a wider audience is an important step, Jesty said.

"We're just really hoping this is a tool that communities and people can use to start a conversation at home and at schools and at community groups. It certainly is an issue and ... I think what we're hoping is it just starts a conversation that isn't being had enough at this point."

CMontanini@postmedia.com

Twitter: @LondonerChris