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THE CANADIAN CHILDREN'S OPTIMIST FOUNDATION RESPONDS TO THE CALL

The Canadian Children's Optimist Foundation is proud to be part of several projects that make a difference in the lives of youth all across Canada. With the outsourcing program, the Canadian Children's Optimist Foundation helped the Kids Mental Health Optimist Club of Canada. The Canadian Children's Optimist Foundation was able to optimize their fundraising efforts in order to produce great videos about anxiety that are available online at munderstanding.ca.

The following article was featured in the *The Londoner* on September 9, 2016 and was written by Chris Montanini. The original text, "Local Approach to Children's Mental Health Awareness Inspires New Optimist Club" can be found online at thelondoner.ca.

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 organization's newest project is a series of short videos featuring professional puppeteers Andy Hayward (Elmo's Christmas Countdown), Frank Meschkuleit (Toopy and Binoo), and Gord Robertson (Zoboofoo). 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."

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 Edwards 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 Edwards added. "It's all Paula, we just found a way to get it out there and get more people involved."



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.