



CAP Mission Statement:

The Creative & Artistic Programs Department uses artistic expression, in all art forms, to educate, prevent, heal, empower and explore mental health and mental illness and its effects on every person.

Creative & Artistic Programs

January 2010



The Happiest of New Years: And The People That Make That Happen

This year, Creative & Artistic Programs at Mental Health Association would like to let everyone know just how great we are! Below is a story about the HEART program & what makes it so special. There are excerpts from a letter I received from HEART performer Deana Barlow. This letter touched my *heart* & I hope it does yours also.

This is something to share (please do!) with friends, colleagues and family. We are so proud of what we do here at MHA & want to share it with all of you. I hope you will enjoy this story and, throughout 2010, learn more about what we do and how you can bring our programs to your school, community program or business!

~ Jessica LaFalce, Director of Creative & Artistic Programs

Every December, we look forward to a new year: a new year filled with opportunities, improvements, promises and hope. Sometimes, the hope you envision isn't really what you expected. Every now and again you get bombarded with a new kind of hope. The best is when it happens at the end of the year. Because you feel a renewed sense of vitality and promise, you feel like nothing can stop you for an entire year.

I have had the honor of working with some excellent individuals over the years here at MHA, and never have I been so inspired or filled with hope as when I innocently opened my email late one night and read a beautiful, unexpected message from one Miss Deana Barlow, a.k.a Wenzday Atemz.

Deana came to me in a whirlwind early in 2009 through Robby Takac and Music is Art. Robby called in January to let me know he'd found a new set of performers for the HEART program. I admit I was skeptical – two female hip-hop singers who “spit beats”?! I really wasn't sure what to expect.

Deana was first invited to observe the other HEART performers, *Agent Me*, at Hutchinson Central Technical High School. Getting an idea of what the program entails, how to interact with the students and how the band had embedded their story with the HEART message, Deana seemed truly interested and excited about the project at hand.

Of course, there is always a “trial period” in which a person's dedication to and understanding of a job can usually be determined. From the beginning, I had never been so impressed with someone than I was of Deana and her on-stage partner, Tomorrow Allen. *Wenzday & Tomorrow* got up in front of 400 elementary students not more than two weeks after first viewing the performance at Hutch Tech. They rapped, sang and talked to the students about some very touchy subjects. Garnering the attention of that many students (or just so many people in general) is not an easy task, especially when you are discussing topics like domestic violence, anger, self-esteem, body image, prison and thoughts of suicide.

I watched it happen in awe. I saw the students wave their arms to the beat, clap, holler after each song and then, almost instantly, become attentive and quiet during the touching stories that Deana and Tomorrow shared. Happiness ensued and the student body, teachers and principal were won over by two young women “spitting beats” and singing songs about having a dream, being responsible for the decisions you make and feeling beautiful with who you *are*.

Fast forward about ten months later... At five schools, more than 3,750 students and 200 faculty have seen Wenzday & Tomorrow perform with the HEART program.

Deana began getting emails from students almost immediately, letting her know the impact she was making on their lives. These are not students from privileged backgrounds; some of them are kids that adults have essentially given up on. But they reached out to Deana because they felt a connection when she came to their school. They felt safe in sharing their stories with Deana. She made an impact on teenagers; there are really not many adults that can say that!

“(HEART) makes me realize the importance of such a positive message and makes me feel like my job here on earth has been confirmed. We are helping these kids more than I ever imagined and it makes my heart smile.”

Deana was someone that, when we met, I recognized a person that did not grow up with the best in life. But what was equally recognizable was her passion and drive for what she does and what she believes in. The stories she shares on stage with so many students are inspiring – actually, inspiring really isn't the word... They are *more* than inspiring. They are beautiful stories that are personal and strong and terrifying all at the same time.

Each time she steps on stage, there's no telling how the students will react. Will they listen, quietly and with no involvement? Will they laugh and make it hard for *Wenzday & Tomorrow* to continue? (I should mention that neither of these has ever happened; and I also continue to send a little wish into the universe before every show that it doesn't.)

“I was one of them. Alone. Abused. Empty. Feeling worthless and purposeless. And I thank god you guys have asked me to be a part of something so powerful and positive. These performances help me to hold my head high just as well as it does the children's and it truly helps my healing process...”

Every auditorium is different, every student population unknown, most teachers and administrators skeptical. But we push on, and when we've finished with the HEART program for the day, *Wenzday & Tomorrow* leave the stage and move on to the cafeteria. Here they eat school lunches, take photos with students and sign autographs; and it is here where we feel a sense of accomplishment – every single one of us involved with the program feels it.

It's not because every student that walks up to us says “you've changed my life.” It isn't even because we get *one* child to say that at every school; but eventually, when a child is alone in front of a computer, they feel empowered. They feel a connection and a sense of security. And that's because of Deana. She encourages these children in a way that, often, no other adult has done. She loves what she does for this program and I am so grateful.

“I think this was all purposed well before we understood what we were getting ourselves into. I would perform for the children and speak this positive message to them all over the world – before any bar gig or tour venture.”

~Deana Barlow, 10 December 2009.

For information about the HEART program and how you can bring Deana's empowering message to your students, contact Jessica LaFalce at Mental Health Association.

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