

ON THIS STAGE, KIDS HEAR STRAIGHT DOPE FROM KIDS

By Jon Winkler

jwinkler@ nashobavalleyvoice. com

LOWELL » Eighteen- year- old Heather Eaton stood before a group of young children at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell and told them that she started smoking synthetic marijuana, or “ spice” as she called it, around the age of 12.

Many of the kids in the crowd audibly gasped, mouths agape learning that someone started smoking a drug at the same age some of them are now. Eaton fortunately wasn’t alone on the stage, as she was joined by other teens who also went through substance abuse at a young age, telling their stories and what they learned in the process.

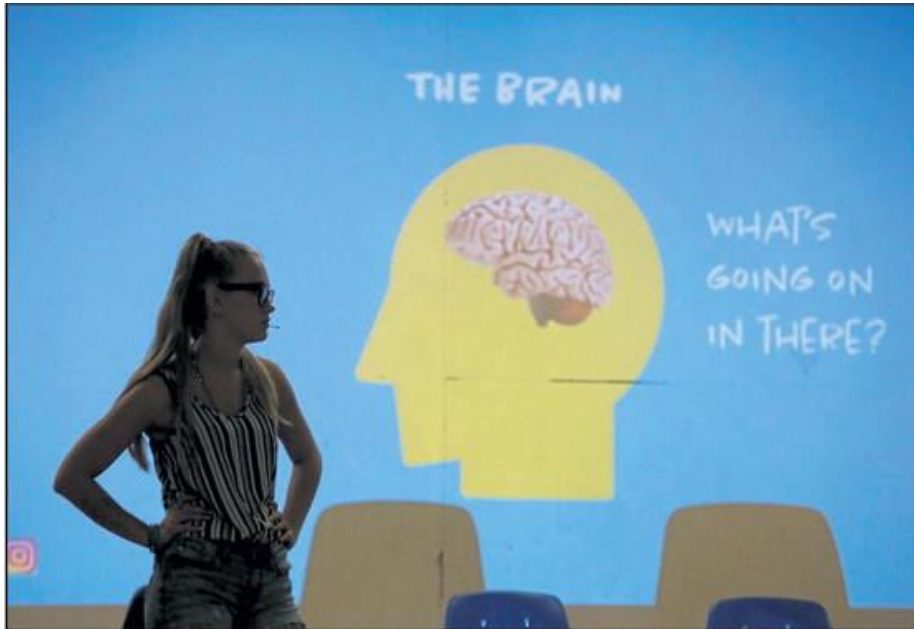
It’s all part of Drug Story Theater, a program taking teenagers in the early stages of recovery from substance abuse and teaching them to use performance art to tell stories about how they came to abuse drugs and alcohol. The performers use this experience, along with researched neuroscience, to teach kids how illicit substances impact mental development. The program, which performed shows for kids at the club on Wednesday, was created and overseen by Dr. Joseph Shrand, an assistant child psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital who also played “Joe” in the original cast of the PBS children’s show *Zoom*. Shrand said he created the program in 2010 while serving as medical director of the Clean and Sober Teens Living Empowered (or CASTLE) addiction treatment program.

“ I wanted to remind people of their value,” he said before the first performance. “ Kids who know their value are less likely to use. We all fear that we’ll be de- valued. The treatment of one becomes the prevention of many. When you remind someone of their value, you become more valuable as well. When those kids are onstage and get a round of applause, it reminds them how valuable they are.”

Shrand said that Drug Story Theater often provides two slightly different performances: one for kids in middle school that focuses on how low self-esteem is a major risk factor to substance abuse and another for high

school students with a stronger focus on peer pressure. Performers reenact scenarios based on their

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Drug Story Theater member Heather Eaton performs in a play to educate kids at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell about drug addiction and recovery.

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Drug Story Theater members Emily and Jared perform in a play to educate kids about drug addiction and recovery.

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own experiences, write their own scripts and play- out the skits to the crowd. Peppered into those skits are brief segments of the neuroscience that goes into how substance abuse at a young age impacts brain

development. Shrand specifically cites how substance abuse can block out Oxytocin, a neurohormone that influences social behavior and manners.

“ We’re trying to destigmatize addiction,” he added. “ These are not bad kids, they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. We’re trying to tell kids that when it comes to drugs and alcohol, just wait. We’re not telling you to never use drugs, though we’d prefer it if you didn’t. We’re just saying that given the development of your brain, just give it time to develop.”

Before and after each performance, the audience is given a survey to fill out containing questions about the functions of certain parts of the brain, eventually showing what they learned from the performance. Shrand said that he and the program will likely be comparing the survey result data taken from the Boys & Girls Club visit to data from survey taken when the program visited Lowell High School last year. The program’s high school visit was seen by Alisha Harrison, program director for the club, who was inspired by the peer- to-peer style of the performances.

“ Our kids don’t want adults preaching to them,” Harrison said. “Adults can try to lecture, but kids today will likely go on their phones and tune us out. These are peers who are actually recovering from substance abuse, which makes for a more powerful message. The peer- to- peer connection is very important to me.”

“ Contribute to society to help with your sobriety, that’s what these kids are doing,” Shrand said.



Middlesex District Attorney Marian Ryan speaks before the Drug Story Theater performance.

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Dr. Joseph Shrand, far left, Middlesex District Attorney Marian Ryan, second from left, with participants in the Drug Story Theater program.

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