

# Role-playing group taps students' insight, sensitivity

By Sean McNamara  
Freelance writer

ELMIRA — The Mental Health Players at Notre Dame High School depict issues on stage through role-playing, but the subjects they cover during their vignettes — such as teen suicide, drug abuse and rape — are often very real to members of their audience.

At a recent performance, Cara Cleveland, a senior actress in the group, portrayed a rape victim. Her performance struck the exposed nerve of a girl in the audience — who had recently been raped — and she became "hysterical," Cleveland said. By the end of that day, the girl had received help and begun counseling.

The Mental Health Players, a program run by the Elmira Psychiatric Center, use the power of role-playing both to educate teens and to help those who are silently suffering by bringing problems into the open and dealing with them.

The group was established in 1969 to "educate the community on people with emotional and mental problems without lecturing to them," according to its founder and director, John M. Edwards, who works at the Elmira Psychiatric Center. Although the Mental Health Players originally consisted of students from several high schools in Elmira, it is now made up solely of Notre Dame students.

"The Notre Dame students had more insight and sensitivity," according to Ed-

wards. "They are a tribute to their community and school."



Notre Dame High School seniors Amy Wright (left) and Dennis Harney role play on the subjects of suicide and depression. The two are members of the Mental Health Players, a program run by the Elmira Psychiatric Center.

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Between 50 and 60 students from Notre Dame participate in the group each year — a commitment that involves several nights and weekends each month. Edwards said the group performs for as many as 5,000 people a month, and the students sometimes travel as far away as Virginia and Canada.

Edwards said the program has grown considerably since 1969, which is a testament to its effectiveness. "Our young people are in such demand now that I can't meet all of the programming requests," Edwards said.

He added that students in the group must be spontaneous and able to relate to diverse

lifestyles. In addition, students have to communicate clearly in order to be members of the group.

Senior Kristi Huffman believes that her experiences as a Mental Health Player will help her "be able to deal with people who have been in traumatic situations."

Tracey Hamilton, a senior who hopes to pursue a career in acting, said the group has taught her public speaking skills.

While students learn a lot as members of the group, most of their efforts are spent instructing their audience. At a typical performance, the Mental Health Players are given an idea for their skit just a few moments before they go on stage.

"They talk with each other and play off

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## Can stereotyping be harmful?

Janet Menz, junior:

When people stereotype others, they lose the ability to see individuality and to see a person as a person, not as a group. Opinions are formed and then there is no chance for people to prove who they really are.



Beth Sigmund, junior:

Stereotyping hurts people because when we generalize about a group of people, it's hard for them to get out of the category that they were placed in. It seems like there would not be any "exceptions to the rule" when stereotyping is used.



## AS TEENS SEE IT

Donna Jenkins, senior:

Stereotyping hurts people because they are judged before you get to know them. Most stereotypes are not true and people are often refused jobs because of this.



Monya Benarab, senior:

Not everyone in a group possesses the negative qualities that people attribute to them. People should be kind anyway and accept others for who they are. This would be more helpful.



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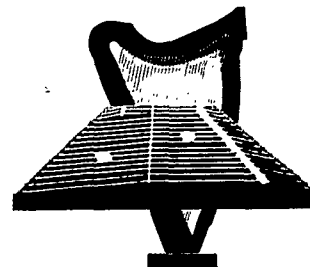
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