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Citation: White, W. L. (2013). Theatre as a tool in addiction recovery and primary prevention: An interview with Lynn Bratley of Improbable Players. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com

Theatre as a Tool in Addiction Recovery and Primary Prevention: An Interview with Lynn Bratley of Improbable Players

William L. White

Emeritus Senior Research Consultant
Chestnut Health Systems
bwhite@chestnut.org

Introduction

An ecumenical (encompassing multiple pathways) culture of recovery is rising in the United States and beyond that is birthing new recovery support institutions (e.g., recovery homes, schools, ministries, cafes, community centers) and forging new media through which the recovery experience is conveyed. The latter include recovery-focused:

- rituals (e.g., the more than 100,000 people in recovery participating in recovery month celebration events in 2012);
- language (e.g., a new recovery lexicon – wellbriety, recovery management, recovery-oriented systems of care, recovery coach, recovery capital, community recovery);
- literature (e.g., proliferation of recovery memoirs and recovery advocacy literature);
- history (e.g., heightened interest in history of recovery mutual aid organizations);
- symbols (purple sashes, banners, t-shirts, advocacy buttons with recovery slogans);
- art (recovery-themed paintings, posters, murals, sculptures; recovery fine arts festivals);
- music (recovery-themed music, Soberfests)
- television and film (e.g., new recovery documentaries – *Bill W.*, *Anonymous People*, *The Wellbriety Movement: Journey of Forgiveness*, *Lost in Moonsocket* – recovery film festivals);
- comedy (e.g., Mark Lundholm, Tara Handron, Jessie Joyce, *Laughs without Liquor* – Recovery Comedy Tour); and
- sport (e.g., recovery-focused athletic events/teams/organizations – Philadelphia Clean Machine, Phoenix Multisport).

It has been exciting to follow and document the growth of this culture of recovery. One of the most interesting and promising of these projects heralds from the City of Boston where Lynn Bratley has used theatre as a tool for recovery advocacy and primary prevention. I had the

opportunity in November 2012 to interview Lynn about the birth and evolution of Improbable Players. Please join us in this engaging conversation.

Bill White: Lynn, tell me how your personal story intersects with the story of Improbable Players.



Lynn Bratley: I have been involved in plays and performing since I was very young – it’s been a lifelong passion for me. Studying creative dramatics in college, I was influenced by Jacob Moreno’s work in group psychotherapy and tools for social sciences he called sociodrama and psychodrama. I ended up earning my undergraduate degree in Drama, so it’s not surprising that when I started going to recovery support meetings, I loved listening to the stories that people told from the podium and saw them in my mind as performances. They made me laugh, cry,

hang on to the edge of my seat, become inspired. The stories were exciting drama – and all the more engaging because they are real and true.

Add to my theater background the frustration I felt after getting sober at my ignorance about either addiction or recovery. How could I have not known anything about these things? I wished my family could sit beside me at meetings and listen to the stories – to help them understand me, to show them how cool people in recovery were, to explain to them that I wasn’t a bad person; I was a sick person. I wanted to air the shame out of the closet and let the world take a fresh look at alcoholism and drug addiction. I wanted to teach young people about these things so they wouldn’t have to go through what I did.

I grew up in the fifties. My parents and their friends had cocktail parties that were loud and messy. I always said to myself, “I’ll never do that!” So I never had a martini or a Manhattan, but when my children were very young, I started having a glass of wine with dinner, then two, and then three, and on into the evening. When my kids got old enough to say, “Mommy, please don’t drink so much,” I put the bottle in the closet and that’s where I drank. I missed a lot of the seventies because I spent every evening in a blackout drinking from my bottle of wine in the closet.

When I was newly sober and before I ever spoke to anyone at a meeting, I worried that my story was too boring compared to others since I drank alone. But as sober time accumulated and I went on commitments and told my drunkalogue a few times, I began to appreciate how all of our stories have a pattern: we picked up a drink or a drug, we got into trouble, we hit bottom, and then through grace, we got clean and sober. That’s my story too. I shared the same story with everyone else – I just got into trouble in my home. And the interesting thing that happened is that my story came to be the plotline for the play that’s most performed today by Improbable Players.

Bill White: How did that personal story lead to the creation of Improbable Players?

Lynn Bratley: During my drinking, I was performing and teaching with several children’s theatre companies. That worked for me because I didn’t drink until five o’clock, and I drank in the closet. So children’s theatre fit my schedule, so to speak. I didn’t miss any shows.

Soon after I got sober, one of those companies was fascinated by my new sobriety and how it was changing me and those around me. We decided to work together on a short video piece about a family and what happened to them at a Thanksgiving reunion where there was a lot of drinking and how that resulted in an intervention. I met a couple of other sober actors at my meetings and brought them into the project.

After the video was finished, there were a lot of scenes and characters that didn't make it into their final cut, and three other people besides me who wanted to keep working together and write a play about prevention that we could present at schools. We learned that a local council on alcoholism was having a peer leadership conference, so we asked if we could do some scenes for them. We needed a name, and I found the word "improbable" in the thesaurus – "unlikely, ridiculous, absurd, crazy, impossible." It fit.

Our show turned out to be a great success and had all the right ingredients – scenes based on our own stories, good pace, laughter, some serious stuff, and underlying lessons. Drinking and driving was a major problem at that time, and we came up with a great scene about that – actually one we still do today. We had a scene about peer pressure, and a funny one about how not to throw up in bed after you've been drinking and the room is spinning. We had a serious scene about a drunk father saying goodnight to his daughter. Most importantly, at the end of our short program, we "came out" as alcoholics and told our drunkalogues. After we took our bows, there was a great rush of teachers and students, with many asking, "When can you come to our school?" That show in 1984 was the beginning of Improbable Players. And although we would have loved to have the original four together forever, they had to leave for one reason or another, and gradually I found other young sober actors to continue the work and became the director.

Bill White: And were the stories of other actors absorbed into the rise of Improbable Players?

Lynn Bratley: Oh yes. because that's how the scripts are created: piece by piece through people's stories, so each play contains parts of many stories written and worked together to make an exciting theatre experience. The first play we made, "I'll Never Do That!," was based on my story, the mother drinking in the closet, but the other characters who surround her – the Dad, the Daughter, and the Son – came to life from other actors' experiences in their own lives and families.

Sometimes one vivid thing that someone said to us – or we hear ourselves saying – inspires a whole scene and drives the plot. I think everyone who is in recovery can recount turning points – the awful ones and the "aha!" ones that started them on the road to recovery. "Do you know what you did last night?" "Hello is this the clinic? I think I might have had sex last night." "Wake up – wake up! Oh, thank god you're alive. You really scared me – I thought you overdosed." "I never wanted to hurt you. That'll never happen again. I'll stop drinking. Forever. Anything. I'm sorry."



Actor Mask: "What did I do last night?"

Devising scenes often starts with a question asked to the actors in the rehearsal rooms. When Improbable Players was commissioned to write a performance for schools about the connection of HIV/AIDS to drinking and drug use, I found three actors in recovery who had the virus, and I invited them to join the cast to help develop the new play. My first question was, "Have you ever had a secret you didn't want to tell, but you knew you had to?" All the actors in that program contributed scenes from their real life stories to make "Passing It On," a funny and moving play that allowed actors to speak openly and honestly about their recovery and living with the virus. It was a powerful lesson for audiences, who were told at the beginning that three of the actors had the virus, but couldn't tell by looking at them who they were.

Bill White: Who have been the primary audiences for the various productions that you've done?

Lynn Bratley: Our main audience is students and faculty in high schools, middle schools, and colleges. Next would be community coalitions for public awareness events. We have more than twelve productions that have been written because of a need or a request, so over the years, we've worked with many organizations to raise awareness of addiction and recovery issues for their constituencies. For Massachusetts Trial Court conferences, convened to educate court personnel about sending offenders to treatment instead of incarceration, we created a short play based on court records that depicted a family over-involved in many aspects of the judicial system because of the father's drinking. As always, after the play, Improbable Players told our own stories of recovery. It was a very moving and effective program. My favorite of our troupes was made up of sober actors over age 65: "The Next Generation," who together wrote a play from their drinking stories and their recovery and performed for senior audiences in Boston, New York, Atlanta, and Jacksonville.



The Next Generation

Bill White: And how many different actors have been involved over these years with you?

Lynn Bratley: There have been over 200 actors, all in personal recovery. You have to be clean and sober at least one year before you audition. Some stay a long, long time, and some stay for a season and then move on. It's a great way for young people in early recovery to re-claim their confidence, be a part of an organization they believe in, and give back. I am still in touch with the original actors, and the internet keeps me connected to many others who were involved.



A scene from Running On E

Bill White: What kind of financial support has allowed you to do these productions over the years?

Lynn Bratley: Improbable Players is supported largely from the sale of performances and workshops, with 30 percent of our income from grants given by private foundations and individuals. In the current recession, the mix is more like 50-50. The cost of a performance and discussion is around \$1,600 plus travel for a four-person program. Grant funding is used to bring free or low-cost programs to youth in schools, and we've been able to do hundreds of programs for inner city schools or at-risk kids who would not otherwise be able to afford it. We are grateful for this support – and to the individuals who make a donation to support the work. Improbable Players is a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation, so contributions are tax deductible.

Bill White: How many people would you estimate have seen your productions since you started?

Lynn Bratley: I would say between 900,000 and one million – that we know of. Before I got a computer, I didn't keep an accurate tally. I started the Improbable Players with a telephone, a file cabinet, a phone book. I used press-type to make a brochure and then copied the addresses onto the flyer from the telephone book. It's a lot easier now. We charged \$250 for a show: \$50 for each actor and \$50 to pay for paper, stamps, and the phone bill.

Bill White: Could you share a story or two that you think conveys the kind of potential impact of the productions you've done, either on the audience or on the players themselves?

Lynn Bratley: We have hundreds of notes and letters from students and teachers about the impact that Improbable Players made at their schools. Many schools invite us back year after year because they say it is the one program that keeps the students' attention. But two stories really stand out for me personally, and I know that this has happened with other actors.

I don't often speak about Improbable Players when I'm at my 12-step meetings, but one evening in a town near where I live, I was on a commitment with my group and I talked about Improbable Players and how we had done a program in a nearby school recently and what it was about and how all the young actors were people in recovery. A woman came up to me after the meeting and said, "Did you go to such-and-such school last week?" And I said, "Yes, we were there." And she said, "Well, I'll tell you something. My daughter saw that program. I've been urging her to go to a counselor because I feel like she needs help and she came home that day and she said, 'Mom, I've decided to go into counseling.'" The daughter told her it was because of a play she saw at school. She saw "I'll Never Do That!," the one about a family and how they're all affected by the mother's drinking. After the play, the actors always suggest, "If you identify with anything in this program, ask for help. Talk about it." And they make sure to introduce guidance counselors and bring them up on stage after the show to reinforce that suggestion.



Performing "I'll Never Do That!" for a national conference

There was another occasion when my husband couldn't go to a performance with me at one of the music schools here in Boston. The young fellow who bought my ticket was sitting next to me, and we got chatting about what he was doing. It sounded so interesting, and I asked if I could see his senior thesis project. I gave him my Improbable Players business card and he said, "Oh, my gosh! Improbable Players?" He said, "My college had you at our Freshman Orientation. I never forgot that play. My father was an alcoholic and my grandfather was an alcoholic I knew if I drank that I was going to have the same thing happen to me. It was your play that helped me not drink during college and not drink since."

Bill White: I'm wondering about the players and the people in recovery who are part of the Improbable Players. Do you think that theatre is a peripheral interest to them as persons in recovery or do you really see theatre as part of their medium of recovery?

Lynn Bratley: I think a little of both. They see their involvement in the company as a way to give back and carry this message, and it reinforces their excitement and commitment to staying away from a drink or a drug. They know that acting in the plays or teaching a workshop is not a substitute for their own recovery program or for their own personal work, but always when you teach something, you have to learn it first and know it well. As we work on the plays, we strengthen our recovery because we are grappling with the issues all the time.

The actors' own personal experience in recovery makes them compassionate educators – they have a language to talk about the characters, their motivations, the basic concepts about addiction and recovery – not in program jargon, but real, honest, and authentic answers. What makes it different from personal recovery is that actors go through the Players' training so they can learn to adapt their responses to be age appropriate for each audience, and they can be articulate about the educational goals and objectives of each play. When I first went to talk with someone about making a grant application to Service to Science, the researcher suggested, "Gee, maybe we should measure the results of the actors staying sober," because it is a real incentive: if you picked up a drink then you couldn't be in the plays anymore. And that is a great incentive.

Bill White: That's a very different kind of service work though, Lynn, because it's not inside a fellowship. It's really service outward into the community.

Lynn Bratley: Yes, and I can tell you without reserve that it's very satisfying. I was in the plays for the first ten years, so I know. You're acting, you're on a team with other people in recovery, you're working for a company whose mission you support, and you are admired for your recovery – not just that you did it, but then that you have the courage to stand up in public and talk about it. You get to tell your story to people who may not have ever seen a real alcoholic or a drug addict in recovery before. I wish I had seen Improbable Players when I was in high school – it would have helped me understand the drinking in my family and maybe saved me some pain.

You never know who's going to be sitting in that audience and who's going to hear what you have to say and get some hope. I've auditioned and hired every actor who has become an Improbable Player. In the audition, we read scenes from the script, and then I ask them to pretend that they are in front of an audience of 500 high school students, and I will ask them typical questions. I ask things like when they started drinking and what happened to them, who noticed, how it ended. My last question is, "What's the difference between life when you were using and life now – what do you like best?" I know they are going to be a good Player when they are so full of gratitude for their recovery that they tear up.

Bill White: Do you recollect some of the things the actors have shared with you about what being in Improbable Players has meant to their recovery?

Lynn Bratley: I've interviewed many of them and put their stories on our website. Here are a few examples.

I had always enjoyed being an artist and being surrounded by artists. Recovery was a battle because I felt that the artistic world and the "altered-state" were somehow intertwined. As I fought for a sober life I found a group that I could relate to, "Artists in Recovery." There I heard Lynn speak about the Improbable Players and how much it helped her during her own journey. Turns out a good friend of mine was also a former Player, and I put out my hand to see how I could help. My first visit to the Players' office became an audition and luckily I enjoy the sound of my own voice because I haven't slowed down yet.

I imagined standing up in front of 30 kids and acting and thought "no biggie", forgetting I had never been sober during my previous performances. When 400 teenagers filled the auditorium I was terrified and excited. I felt like I had an impact. When I came back out of my role, the students even wanted to know more. About me, about recovery, they were hungry for knowledge. I don't remember an assembly for any cause demanding this kind of attention.

I was asked if performing something so personal can trigger some old emotions. The truth is yes, but it reminds me more of how hard I have worked to get away from that life, and how proud I am to now share that experience with the next generation. The feelings of hope I get looking out at those kids makes me work that much harder to repay such inspiration in turn.

The show was awesome! I was in tears (ask the other guys) afterwards because it was such a profound experience to see 180 kids and literally seeing them relate to the experience of living with alcoholism and addiction in the house and family. And then talking to them one on one was amazing. I am so grateful I am part of the troupe. Thank you so much for bringing me aboard.

I think if I had seen a performance such as Running on E or some of the other Improbable Player shows while I was in high school, I would have been filled with hope and not felt so alone. Maybe I would have reached out for help with my issues around self-esteem, addiction and substance abuse. I didn't know that people who'd been through using and abusing could come out successful and happy--or even alive.

Being a Player reinforces my hope in a sober life and helps me to share this hope with others- especially kids. The educational and autobiographical aspect of the shows makes

me feel that nothing I went through was in vain. It gives me a feeling that even if we can't stop anyone from using, they can begin to get help, or to get clarity and education about the disease of addiction. And if they have anyone in their lives who is using or in danger because of substance abuse, they could learn some tools from us and maybe change their lives for the better.

Bill White: What kinds of messages about recovery are conveyed to audiences through your production? You've already mentioned the theme of, "If you're responding to this, then get help." What are some others?

Lynn Bratley: We're a piece of the prevention puzzle in a community. We're visual. Not everyone can learn from a book or a lesson sitting at their desk but if they see it, they can understand it. In one of our plays, the actors come crashing through the doors at the back of the auditorium looking like street bums. When they take off their coats and masks on stage, they reveal normal looking people who tell the audience that they themselves are people in long-term recovery from alcohol and other drugs. We bust stereotypes right away.



"Is this what an addict looks like?"

The actors "market" the rewards and benefits of a healthy lifestyle, making non-use attractive and exciting. The plays never demonstrate drug use or portray it in a glamorous light. They show that alcohol and other drug use was destructive, and caused pain and loss.

In the past, some school administrators would say, "We don't invite alcoholics into our school because the message is, 'If you drank and got sober, then our students think they can do the same thing.'" Our message is that if drinking had been all that great, we would still be doing it. But it didn't work. It doesn't work.. We remind them that you don't have to be an addict to have a really devastating life change because of drinking too much or taking drugs.



"Two of six masks that represent the merry-go-round of addiction"

The actors tell their stories. They talk about how they used to be destructive, now they are constructive. They exude gratitude for recovery. And in a lot of ways, they don't have to say it – they just look great. We're honest with audiences about how we still live with the consequences of our using. We provide inspiration for those sitting in the audience who are trying to stay sober.

Bill White: One of the central messages of the recovery advocacy movement is that addiction is so visible in our culture, but recovery remains pretty invisible. In response, the movement is saying that long-term recovery is a reality and that there are multiple pathways to long-term recovery. Are these messages conveyed through the work that you do?

Lynn Bratley: Oh, definitely. When we first started, it was such an unusual thing that people in recovery would actually tell their stories from the stage – audiences were struck by the authenticity of what we did and its emotional power. It is still true. The actors tell their one-minute story at the end of each play: how they started drinking or using drugs, what happened to them, how things changed, and what life is like now. The Players respect the 12-step traditions, and never talk about memberships in recovery organizations. None of the actors did it alone though – all asked for help.

It's an inspiration for audiences to see that here's one person in the company that's got one year sober and another who has ten years, and they like their life. They're not moping around wishing they could drink again. Maybe they lost a few friends – that's a fear kids have about not drinking – but that fear is relieved when they see our actors living their young lives full of fun and excitement without alcohol or drugs. The actors model what recovery might look like for them. One of our actors saw us when she was in high school. And then when she graduated from high school and got sober, she auditioned and became an actor with us. Later she said, "I can honestly say I remember seeing the program in high school, feeling the way I felt and thinking, 'Oh, wow! These people don't drink and they're happy! Maybe I can have a life, after all!'"

Bill White: You've referenced that Improbable Players is a piece of the prevention puzzle. I'm also wondering about early intervention. Does watching your presentations get to kids already on their way to being in trouble or who are already in trouble?

Lynn Bratley: Yes, from what we see and hear. We have not done rigorous pre- and post-evaluations of the effects of our programs. Someday maybe. What we have now are anecdotal reports of students asking for help in response to our shows. We have student comments on feedback forms. We invite them to come on stage after the show and speak with the actors or talk to a counselor or another trusted adult. Our programs help many young people who are growing up in a family where there's drinking and who are afraid to talk to anyone about it because they feel ashamed. Whatever isn't covered in our plays, it's covered in the stories that the actors tell.

Bill White: What is your vision now for the future of Improbable Players?

Lynn Bratley: We are about to begin a strategic planning process with the Board of Directors and committed stakeholders. In preparation, we have been envisioning strategies for making our work more accessible to others and for identifying new leadership so that the company will continue to thrive and grow. We would like to publish our work; we've talked about putting the plays on film and making a documentary to highlight the actors, rehearsals, theatre workshops,

and plays. We want to continue to work with people in their community coalitions to do prevention through drama across the country.

Bill White: If people from other communities would like to replicate what you are doing, should they just get in contact with you to talk potentially about how to do that?

Lynn Bratley: Yes. Although the possibility of franchising Improbable Players is intriguing and has been talked about, we're not quite ready to make that move. But we do have actors and teaching artists who are available to travel nationally to teach our methods. We have a comprehensive manual for training actors. We have a curriculum guide for teaching theatre, *improbable PLAYERS: Using Applied Theater in Addictions Prevention*. People who want to reach us can go to our website at <http://www.improbableplayers.org/> or email me at lynnbratley@improbableplayers.org or the company email players@improbableplayers.org.

Bill White: Lynn, as you look back over the experience with Improbable Players, what's been most personally meaningful for you?

Lynn Bratley: It's making recovery visible and accessible to people. Honestly, Bill, when I first heard that Faces and Voices of Recovery was forming, I thought, "We do that!" We have been putting a face on recovery all these years. That's exactly what we do.

Bill White: Yes. That's exactly what you do.

Lynn Bratley: It's inspiring for me that the Players' mission continues: dramatically demonstrating that people who had problems with alcohol and other drugs can and do recover, and that we look just like those who have not had that experience – and by being who we are, we help to relieve pain and suffering. I also have to say that I've been blessed to work with all of the actors who have played many different parts in the company. It's really a thrill for me to see them come in as someone who's maybe newly sober and not quite back in their career, and then see many of them going on to getting their advanced degree and going on to really interesting careers. We've mentored each other through many rehearsals, messy disagreements, and great reconciliations. I have learned as much from them as they have learned from me.

Bill White: You know, I hadn't thought of that. This is a kind of pathway for career re-entry in acting for people who lost their way through their addiction.

Lynn Bratley: It is, and not just for careers in acting, but a variety of other pursuits, teaching, pre-med, dance, visual arts – but also of course performing, starting other companies, managing theaters and the like. Improbable Players is a whole culture of recovery, including administrative staff: it just works better that way.

Bill White: Lynn, is there anything that we haven't touched on that you think is important for our readers to know about Improbable Players?

Lynn Bratley: Improbable Players have put an authentic face on recovery for so many people through live public performances since 1984. For the actors who have put their hearts and souls into the plays and theater workshops, it has been a tool in addiction recovery. For most of the audiences, we will never know how our little troupe has changed lives. We've given out questionnaires and tallied responses, but I'm not convinced the impact can be measured that way. We do know without a doubt that we've planted seeds of hope and inspiration with so many people who are sitting in the audience, thinking about their families, their relationships,

themselves. When I was at Recovery Day at the Massachusetts State House last year, a woman came up to me and said, “I was a teacher at a school where you performed. When I saw that beautiful blonde on stage (me! nearly thirty years ago) and she said that she was an alcoholic and she told her story of recovery, that’s how hope came into my life and my own recovery started.” Such humble stories are for me another kind of evidence.

Bill White: Lynn, thank you for taking the time to share this incredible story with us and thank you for all you do for people seeking and in recovery.

Acknowledgement: Support for this interview series is provided by the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) through a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT). The opinions expressed herein are the view of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), SAMHSA, or CSAT.

Photo credits: Page1 Chris Everett, page 6 Eric Hess, page 7 **Lynn Bratley**

Appendix

Improbable Players: Using Applied Theater in Addictions Prevention

Lynn Bratley

Creating one’s life as a work of art

I started a theater company to change the world one person, one audience at a time. In my experience, theater is a powerful way to teach and learn—it captivates, educates, and motivates, and one vivid scene is worth a thousand words. My theater’s mission is to educate people about a devastating public health problem, addiction, and its impact on our families, communities, and selves. I named it “improbable” because all of the actors are in recovery and the plays come from their stories.

Problems with alcoholism and drug addiction are widespread and alarming. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov) sees excessive alcohol use a largely unrecognized public health problem, including binge and underage drinking. Alcohol use is the third leading preventable cause of death in the U.S. and is responsible for more than 79,000 deaths annually and a wide range of health and social problems. Excessive alcohol use costs the U.S. over \$185 billion annually due to lost production, health and medical care, motor vehicle accidents, and violent crime. Many addicts live in families, of course, and the National Association of Children of Alcoholics (www.nacoa.net) estimates that there are 26.8 million children under 18 living in households with at least one alcoholic parent. And what about the kids? The National Institute on Drug Abuse (www.drugabuse.gov) finds that teens are still abusing high levels of alternate tobacco products, marijuana, and prescription drugs: pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives.

It seems everybody knows someone who has been affected by alcohol or other drugs, and all of us play a part in this drama in our own personal struggles and in our relationships, families, and neighborhoods. One doesn’t have to be an addict to suffer an unexpected outcome of drinking; one doesn’t have to be an addict to suffer a devastating, life-changing (or life-ending) consequence; one doesn’t have to be an addict to suffer problems caused by other people’s

use. Addiction is everywhere, and so is recovery. It's just that most of the time recovery is hidden, and that was my impetus for starting *Improbable Players*.

The idea of putting recovery stories on stage came to me when I stopped drinking in 1982 and began to hear stories much like mine in the twelve-step meetings I attended. Many of us had been caught up in the consequences of our drinking, but didn't have a clue why until we put down the drink or drug and got educated: addiction is a threefold disease which affects people mentally, physically, and spiritually. As I listened to people in the meetings, I visualized their stories and imagined bringing them out of the meeting halls and before the public. I understood why meetings were anonymous, but I didn't understand why people didn't talk about their recovery outside of those meetings.

I found other actors at the meetings who wanted to work with me. We met to tell our stories and act them out. We transcribed them and scripted them directly from the tapes- applied theater in its most basic form. We made each other laugh and cry and nod our heads in recognition. We pared our scenes down, made them dramatic, revised and rewrote, assembled them into a program that needed testing, and found our first audience in a group of teen peer leaders at a conference in 1984. Our program captured their attention and made them laugh. We shocked them with stories from our pasts without glorifying them, dramatized alternatives to drinking, and let them know they didn't have to drink to have fun: that drinking is a choice, and so is not drinking.

We didn't hide; we broke out of the meeting rooms. We held up the stereotype, the stigma, the weight of the words "alcoholic" and "drug addict." We said the words, laughed at them, claimed them, put a real face on them, and let the audience know that we were people who had been through some tough times and were now finding ways to lead healthy lives. We weren't ashamed. We felt free from our addictions and didn't wish we could drink again. Our theater came into being to eliminate the shame and secrecy that keeps people silent and prevents them from getting help and from understanding they are not alone. We began our efforts to change the world, and on the way we changed ourselves.

Working with archetypes

In *Recovery as a Heroic Journey*, William L. White likens the patterns of Joseph Campbell's mythic hero—the departure into the unknown, the transformation by great calamities and through the fire, the struggle out of it, and the hero's return home—to each addict's own personal story. This is the amazing and heroic metamorphosis of going from addiction to recovery. The most difficult stage, White asserts, is not the trial by fire, but the return home-

This is the stage of reentry into the community that was left behind, reconciliation between the hero and the family/community, and a stage of service through which the hero delivers the gift of his/her newfound knowledge....to complete the heroic journey, the hero who left the community as a seeker must return to both give to and receive something from the community. . . the boon can be offered through acts of restitution, by carrying a message of hope to others, and by modeling the lessons contained in the boon.

My own story, which once seemed so ordinary to me—a story of closet drinking, nightly blackouts, and endless promises to quit—became the basis for the first play, still performed today. Its title, *I'll Never Do That!*, is what I vowed to myself as I watched the consequences of family cocktail hour. *I'll Never Do That!* tells a timeless story of addiction and the hope and reality of long-term recovery. So it was that I came out of the closet and became an improbable player, a hero, a healer. I used to think that audiences calling the *Players* brave and courageous were

wrong, but I have come to understand what White means: that coming back to the community to teach lessons and give back *is* brave in a world where neither addiction nor recovery is fully understood.

Identifying and working toward our life's purpose

All of the Improbable Players are young professional actors in long-term recovery integrating their passion for performing with their drive to give back. They are active in their careers and in their own personal recovery, modeling healthy choices— in the plays and in real life— and teaching audience members about community resources and how to ask for help. All of the plays have been written from the authentic, poignant, and funny stories of our actors, who are the company's most valuable assets. Each day they reaffirm the choice to be people in recovery by telling and re-telling their stories on stage. Below several of the Players describe what being a member of the troupe has meant to them.

MP: I like most everything about being an Improbable Player. I respect the realness of the scenes we perform. It is incredibly uncanny how the characters I play mirror the actual life that I have lived. I enjoy the honesty, humor and bond among the actors; we all inspire each other and we most certainly make each other laugh. I love the feeling of getting to connect with the audience at our shows. It is quite a learning experience for me to listen to the questions high school students ask of us. I like having the opportunity to reflect on my past and realize what position I was in when I was their age. I hope that I will be able to prevent someone from going through what I did.

NF: I think if I had seen a performance such as “Running on E” or some of the other Improbable Player shows while I was in high school, I would have been filled with hope and not felt so alone. Maybe I would have reached out for help with my issues of self-esteem and addiction. I didn't know that people who'd been through using and abusing could come out successful and happy—or even alive. Being a Player reinforces my hope in a sober life and helps me to share this hope with others, especially kids.

AS: I like acting in the plays, but teaching is my favorite part of being a Player. I struggle with understanding the meaning of my life. The first time I said, “Hi, I'm A, and I'm an alcoholic,” in front of an audience of 400 of high school kids, I was exhilarated. I got very emotional. I felt gratitude. I understood that I wasn't doing this for me, but I was passing along an important message for them. I heard some murmurs from the crowd and one student said, “No way!” and made me laugh. As an Improbable Player I can be an alcoholic, an actor, a teacher, a role model, an employee—and that's really cool! All the pieces of my life fit together.

MW: My story might be tame to some people, but that's OK, because there are some people who will identify more with a story like that. The value of all our stories is that people can identify with them and maybe change their lives. It is amazing for me to go back into schools. When I was drinking, I didn't realize where it would take me. During that time of my life I would have appreciated someone being up front with me about the consequences of the partying I was doing. Going into schools makes me remember where I was back then, and it opens my eyes to issues bigger than myself. Recently a high school student came up to me after the show and related her story of recovery, and how the performance reinforced her choice to stay sober.

MF: I earned my degree in Theater Arts and I love performing with the Players because I get to act and help kids. I used when I was their age, and I can relate to what some of them are going through. I see my old self in the characters I play. It helps me remember where I came from, and how different life is now. I stay sober one day at a time, and don't take anything for granted.

The last player to speak of her experience with the troupe, KK, was part of a team of six other young sober actors who worked together to develop "Running On E," a play about kids in trouble with drugs, and how one of them hits bottom and has to learn how to get clean—or die. The play follows her real-life story of addiction and recovery.

KK: It was intense to re-live part of my life. And it was healing. When I look at the play now, I can say to myself, "This is how I used to live. But I don't live that way anymore." I've been clean for four years now. My life today—my recovery— is a continuation of my character's story in the play that the audience doesn't see. Being in the play really helps me see how far I've come since then." Students thank her for her bravery in telling her story to them. They ask for her advice in stopping their own or their friends' drug use. "I love working with Improbable Players. Performing in the plays enriches my recovery. It always reminds me that in order to keep it, I have to give it away."

Using the stage to tell our stories

Improbable Players offer programs – primarily devised for schools and colleges – made up of scenes that dramatically reveal the consequences of choices young people often face. As live theatrical events, these programs convey a message that is visceral, intense, personal, and credible. By viewing true and relatable performances that demonstrate common patterns of addiction in daily life, audience members can identify behavior patterns from their own lives that they may have previously ignored.

After the 45-minute play, the actors step out of their roles to reveal their own life experiences in one-minute stories. A question and answer session allows everyone in the theater— actors and audience— time to process and respond to what they have experienced.



Post-Performance Q & A

Teachers and counselors are introduced and local resources are announced. Back in classrooms, students and teachers take additional time for a contemplative assessment: writing responses to written questions about the program, looking over discussion guide booklets provided by the Players, and reviewing community resource lists provided by the schools.

Teachers wrote:

- The performances directly connected to the new health curriculum that is being taught here.
- Your program presented a realistic view of how things get bad and out of control before you know it.
- In the weeks after your show, students have generated discussions in class. Students in counseling have made reference to the program and opened up about the topic in ways they hadn't before.
- We have started a drug and alcohol program at our school which is a direct result of your program.
- Most students liked when the actors talked about themselves and their own experiences.
- Students were really engaged in the whole program, and loved the Q&A.
- What an exciting and unique approach to getting your message heard. The faculty and staff were awed by each of your characters, and the way you portrayed them. You have turned your experiential knowledge into a teaching tool for others. What a beautiful gift to give.

Students wrote,

I liked the play overall because. . .

- It actually showed us what people were experiencing.
- I felt like I was in the play and I forgot they were just acting.
- It showed what it would be like to have that kind of family.
- It showed a realistic example of how alcohol affects them and the people around them.
- It really got people's attention and why you shouldn't be an alcoholic.
- It's true that the whole family becomes messed up because of someone in the family.
- When I saw what drinking does to you it made me not want to do it.

I know someone like someone in the play because . . .

- They don't want to talk when I try to tell them something about smoking.
- One of my family members is a heavy drinker.
- I should quit smoking pot. I can see what happened to Mike (actor) happening to me in the future if I don't stop now.
- My uncle who has cancer smokes a pack a day.
- She tried to keep the family together, like the daughter in the play.
- My mom's friend died of alcoholism.
- She took shots at my very first birthday and is an alcoholic.
- She had too much drugs and lost her kids.
- They just drink once in a while but then they drink a lot.

I liked the actors sharing their real stories because . . .

- They told how drugs and other things were killing them and how they stopped – that was good.
- I wanted to learn how they worked it out.
- It was interesting to hear about how they recovered.
- They showed me that drugs are worse than you think they are.
- I got to hear what got to them so I don't get into it myself.

- I liked how they were brave enough to be open about their personal experiences.

What I do to solve the problem...

- I go online for answers.
- I talk to people about it.
- I try to stop people from making mistakes.
- I am swearing myself not to drink.
- I try to talk them out of it before they become addicted.
- I hide it or throw it away.
- I think friends should talk to each other and tell them, "Oh, that's not cool to do."
- Being in a club is what I do.
- I'd ask them, "Why are you doing this to yourself?"
- I promise I won't do much, and if I do I won't drink and drive or I won't get high ever.
- I think our town should set up programs for people who need help.
- Assemblies like the one today will help stop the problem.

Email from a student:

I just wanted to let your company know that after an Improbable Players performance at my high school in Boston, over a month ago, I really started to think about changing my ways. I had become very dependent on alcohol at just 14 years old, and the performance made me realize how it had really contributed to my depression instead of helping me forget about my pain. I actually went to the showing for the humor spin of it, but I didn't expect it to really change how I wanted to live my life. Ever since that day, I have stopped drinking and honestly find it kind of sick when I hear my friends or classmates saying how drunk they're going to get. . . I can't believe I had been brainwashed into believing it was the source of fun as well. Anyways, I just wanted to thank your company because even though when it was done, there were people in the hallways saying they bet no one was influenced, but I truly was.

Role-playing the issues in theater workshops

An integral part of the company's educational outreach has been working in partnership with community groups of all ages in interactive workshop settings, teaching Improbable Players' improvisational and applied theater techniques. The workshops provide a safe and creative environment to teach about prevention, tell stories that become scenes, create engaging characters, experiment with decision-making and problem solving, and encourage healthy choices. They also teach the value of the arts in processing difficult or negative feelings and

channeling them into the creation of something beautiful, inspiring, and useful—the essence of applied theater and a way to empower learners as active agents in their own education.

Improbable Players' teaching artists have rich backgrounds in recovery and in theater, allowing them to easily coach and guide in service of both topics. The company's plays come from our personal stories, but in the workshops we are sociodramatists: researching community crises and conflicts, finding group solutions in the role plays, and teaching about classic patterns.

We begin a new workshop by asking, "What do you hate that happens because of alcohol or other drug use?" We listen for participants' thoughtful responses about things that happen not in their own lives but events from the news and from school halls, from neighborhoods, stories from books, films, things that trouble their hearts. From these lists come the amazing and poignant themes for dramatizations subsequently acted out in the sessions.

Even though we don't ask for the students' real stories, what emerge *are* real stories: stories about real things that make them worried or concerned. Once we have those topics, we can go about discovering solutions in a safe environment that protects the students' personal information. If the rule is established that nothing is to come from your personal life, then no matter what you do, it is not considered to be personal, though it may have tremendous personal meaning

Each workshop begins with the students generating a list of things that happen as a result of alcohol or other drug use. After the list is read back to the group, we take a vote to choose which topic to act out. Then we break into small groups that plan and practice various scenes and subsequently present the scenes one at a time. The Players' teaching artist directs and guides the scenes to help students to discover patterns and strategies that will change the outcome of the things that affect them so much..

The following list was generated by a group of high school students.

I really hate it when:

- I hear that someone got killed by a drunk driver.
- People act more messed up than they really are because they think it's cool.
- Drunk drivers get their license back in six months.
- People who drink too much die from liver disease.
- They break their plans and they can't go with you because they have a hangover.
- They drink and their personality changes.
- Your friends drive drunk and die.
- People get taken advantage of.
- People who are drinking keep drinking more and more even though they are hurting themselves.
- People get AIDS because of careless mistakes when they are using.
- They say, "It's not so hard to stop."
- People with talents start to lose their talents.
- Little kids get hit by cars because of drunk drivers.
- They say, "It's not going to hurt me", when they start to use.
- People change who they are, and they betray your trust.
- They tell you, "Drink to get rid of your problems."
- They steal to support their habit.
- They risk their lives to support their habit.
- People drink at inappropriate times—like at breakfast or after church.

- People make promises they can't keep because of their using.
- They see the devastation, but they keep on doing it.
- They have a serious problem, but they don't ask for help.
- They try to get others to use, too.
- Friends don't say something—they don't look after them.
- Drugs are so easy to get—any kid can get them—it's just available.
- Parents use in front of their kids—and some let their kids use, too.
- Whole families are affected by someone drinking.*

The group votes on which scene to act out, and in this case they chose whole families are affected by someone drinking.

SCENE: When the parents come home in the evening, they find that one of their daughters is sick from using. They blame the older daughter for not keeping track of her sister. The father threatens to call the police and the school. The daughter begs him not to. The father says, "Another Christmas ruined in this family."

Middle school students at the same school made a similar list and voted to act out "kids get beat up by drunk parents."

SCENE: The son comes home with his two friends. He brings his friends home with him because otherwise his father will beat him up. The father is drinking and watching TV. When the boys come in he says, "Who said you could bring anybody home?" The son asks him to let him and his friends play the new video game. The father agrees, but then hangs around and makes inappropriate remarks to the friends. He won't leave and even offers weed to the friends. The son asks him to go away, but he won't. He says to his father, "You never let me have any fun." Finally the kids leave and go over to one of the other kids' house.

Reflection: an ongoing part of the process

The scenes that students develop form a platform for observation and discussion and a springboard for problem-solving. Questions asked in reflection might be: How did this scene reflect the problem we chose to act out? What happened in this scene? What could the characters do differently? Who could they talk to about this situation? Where could they get help? Why was this scene so interesting to watch? If someone has an idea for what a character might say and do differently, these changes might show up when the scene is performed the next day. Perhaps new characters will be introduced. A scene is always processed and at least one positive action is found. Together, we imagine better possibilities.

In this way, our workshop sessions combine theater and health education. Discussions about scenes present opportunities to teach basic concepts about substance abuse disorders and playmaking. Theater provides the form and structure, and the topic challenges knowledge and attitudes surrounding alcohol and drugs. The Players' teaching artist directs and guides improvisations and coaches the participants in replaying scenes so that they can try out new behaviors through characters who have brave, healthy, and interesting responses to the given situation. On their own, the students might never have considered these responses as possible.

The Players work with five basic topics that are rich with possibilities and that span a range of questions around people's relationship with alcohol/other drug use. 1. How are we affected personally by alcohol/drug use? 2. How are we affected as members of our families? 3. How are we affected as members of our peer group? 4. How can we help another person? 5. How can

we strengthen our personal resiliency by engaging in activities we love to do throughout our lives?

Participants demonstrate knowledge and understanding of both theater and prevention through scenes, monologues, journal writing, drawings, photographs, poetry, and questionnaires. Personal documenting transforms the “I really hate it when. . .” thoughts and emotions into the creation of something beautiful and personal that can be kept, remembered, and seen as valuable. Here is student writing from different high schools about each of the topics.

How are we affected personally by those who drink or use drugs?

I don't know what's happening to me. It's like I have a disease. I feel really weak and tired. I shouldn't have gone to that party last night. The only reason I went was because my boyfriend forced me to go. I wouldn't have drank either, but he forced me to. I hate being forced to do things, but I love him so much that when he tells me to something I don't think he's really forcing me. I mean, don't get me wrong. I am not being abused. I just can't believe that sometimes I get so carried away with love. But Tracy, please don't tell anyone that I have a bruise on my back. I would kill you if you did.

How are we affected as members of our peer group?

He was just one of those kids. . .you know, one of those kids that was not just going to do shit after he graduated. You could just look at him and see it. He was the type of kid who knew everyone's parents and smiled to them and called them by name when he saw them. He was the type of kid who your mom would ask about at the dinner table. You could just have a conversation with him, a real deep conversation, about pretty much anything. He was just cool, you know, just a cool kid. And smart. But now he's different. He went down the drain. No one likes him. He walks down the halls like he's in a daze. His brother got him into it, the middle one— he's a dealer. His hair is a mess. He's a mess. He never says hi. Don't even know if he sees me when I walk by. He's just like, you know, out of it. He looks trashed. All the time. He's failing everything. His parents have to come into school and beg his teachers not to fail him. They live in a big house you know, not in the towers or anything. They've got a golden retriever and a cat named after a Disney character. He was a good kid.

How can we help another person?

Dad, I am really hurt and disappointed at your drinking. You stumble around, and when you drive I am afraid that this is the end and I'm going to die. I have a teacher at my school who works at a detox. Why don't you go? If you get help you will live like you just started a new life. I really care for you and I don't want you to die, so please get help and go to a detox or rehab. Your son, Luis

How can we strengthen our personal resiliency?

I try to always remember the bad times – what it was like at the end of my use, and what happened and how I felt during my last use. So now I want to set myself up for a successful, bright future. I want to be a successful baseball player in college. Now I know the difference between right and wrong. I want to live. I want to stay out of jail. I want to continue being honest with myself. I want to have self-respect, being proud of who I am. I want to be happy, not lonely.

Across centuries, many cultures and traditions have used the stage to tell stories about peoples' lives. I couldn't imagine *not* telling my own. We stage our stories to make people recognize the destruction of addiction and the power of recovery. In the end, this small theater company makes no claims of miraculous transformation on its small circle of influence— our troupe of actors, those who witness the plays in the audience, and our theater workshop participants. But we can claim that we have planted seeds; we have inspired; we have helped many to imagine and enact great possibilities in their lives. We have played a part in raising community awareness and generating change one person, one audience at a time.