

Final Report for the Addictions Counsellor position for the Vancouver run and Western Canada Tour of Shattering 2008

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The Addiction Counsellor position with the Shattering project encompassed two main areas of work. One of these was providing support to audience members during the event, and while on tour also acting as a liaison to our sponsors and local addictions teams. In this role I provided on-site support to audience members, information about local resources, as well as orientation to local support teams about the process of forum theatre and the roles of counselling support in that process. The second part of my job was providing support to cast and company members throughout the Vancouver run and tour. I will outline the main elements of both these areas of work.

Liaison and Counselling Support

My work as a liaison to local sponsors and addictions teams looked slightly different in each community we visited. These differences were often about how much people knew about the Shattering project and the use of forum theatre in prevention work. Generally my relationship with sponsors and support teams began with a meeting before the event to explain about the process of forum theatre and how it would be used to create community based dialogue around addiction issues. People often had questions about the cast and how the play was created. These discussions were important in helping people understand the vision and philosophy of the Shattering project and Theatre for Living on a whole.

These meetings were often used as an opportunity to talk about some of the issues that were manifesting in the community around addiction; including what the community was doing to address these issues, and what some of the gaps and challenges were to creating positive change. While each community had its unique issues, there were also common threads that I noticed and shared in these meetings. Sponsors and support teams were interested to hear about the issues that other communities faced and some of the ways they had approached addressing such issues. This was particularly the case in more rural

communities dealing with drug and addiction issues connected to industry and work camps etc. These communities usually had very few addiction services spread over large geographical areas, and also had few connections to other regions, services etc. I would often talk about the stories I had heard in communities about the networking that local service providers and community members had done with various community/social services from nearby towns, cities and in some cases other regions in order to creatively address some of the gaps in information, services, resources etc.

During these meetings we would also discuss the role of the support team during the theatre event. This support work again looked different depending on the community. There were nights when some audience members were triggered by the play and became visibly upset. On these occasions either myself or one of the local support people would provide debriefing and brief counselling support. I generally tried to encourage the local counsellors to take on this role when possible as it was an opportunity to build ongoing relationships and provide information about local resources available to people should they want more support. More often, audience participants wanted to talk about how the event impacted their perceptions and understanding of addiction issues and how they might be addressed. I saw these discussions as being incredibly valuable in that one of the goals of the Shattering project was around challenging the myths and assumptions that we as a society maintain around issues of addiction. Many audience members engaged with the support team to talk about these shifts in understanding in the context of their own lived experiences either with their own addictions, or even more often within their relationships with family members, friends, clients etc. Having the chance to debrief these insights in the context of their own challenges helped people gain deeper insight as well as a working knowledge of how to apply the learning they received from the event in their own lives.

There were a number of themes that arose in these kinds of conversations with participants. One of these was the importance of meeting people where they are at and trusting knowledge gained through lived experience. The fact that this was a point of significant learning for many people I think shows our society's tendency to devalue

users' knowledge and experiences, and the tendency of traditional addiction education campaigns to do the same. Another theme people often talked about was coming to better understand the difference between the symptoms of addictions and some of its root causes. Prevention education has traditionally been based on the idea that "just saying no" is the primary way to deal with addiction in society. People talked about how this did not fit with their experiences, and yet many had not had the opportunity to really explore the root causes of addiction in their own world as a result of this focus on use/abstinence. Attached to this was the theme of safety, and coming to view safety, or rather ideas about safety as a subjective construct. This often came up in discussions with parents trying to better understand their youth in all sorts of situations not just those relating to addiction or drug use.

Many people spoke about how impressed they were with the knowledge that existed within their communities around how addiction issues might be addressed in different situations. People commented on this in relation to the youth in their communities, as well as users or people in recovery, and general community members. There was more than one occasion that people talked to me about their surprise with who went up on stage and what they contributed to the event. These were people that were typically quiet in group events and people who had lived experiences that were generally not recognized as having the expertise they displayed during the event. Many people, including supports, sponsors and general community members, talked to me after the shows about how impressed they were with the event's ability to draw out these kinds of expertise within their community and engage with individuals and groups who were often not so engaged.

Internal Counselling Support

My role with the cast and touring company included providing support to individuals and to the group as issues came up. Being on the road, people were for the most part away from their friends, families and support networks. Personal issues arose as a result of the intensity of the forum events and also through interpersonal and group dynamics within the company. I provided debriefing, conflict mediation, and company meeting facilitation to support the company in working through these issues as they came up.