

Dance drama confronts suicide tragedy

Next Wednesday, Josh Platzer should have celebrated his 17th birthday. Instead, many of Josh's friends, neighbours and teachers will mark the day by gathering in his old school's gym to watch a powerful dance drama called *ICE: beyond cool*.

Staged by DanceArts Vancouver as an "open dress rehearsal" for an eight-city national tour that begins the following week, the production is built on a theme Josh's friends may find too close for comfort. But then comfort is not what *ICE* is about. It's about teen suicide, and this particular performance is being dedicated to the memory of the Point Grey Secondary student, who took his life just over a year ago.

That it is taking place on Josh's birthday is serendipitous, or at least that's how his parents, Jude and Ben Platzer, bravely try to think of it. It was Jude's idea to bring *ICE* to the high school as a way to promote healthy dialogue on a topic too often avoided. In fact, she believes Josh might have celebrated his 17th, and many more birthdays, if channels of communication between teens and adults, health providers and counsellors, teachers and parents were more open when her son was alive.

I wrote briefly about Josh last week, in a follow-up to a column about problems some local parents have had using the 911 line to find their missing children. Jude then invited me to tea to talk about a bigger issue — the problem our whole society has in finding the words and will to confront the twin plagues of depression and suicide that all too often turn missing kids into tragic statistics.

In Canada, suicide is the second leading cause of death for 15- to 19-year-olds, after car crashes. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, the suicide rate has almost quadrupled in the past generation. Teenage boys are approximately three times more likely to commit suicide than girls; in at least half of all cases there is a link with depression.

In Josh's case, depression was diagnosed in his 16th year, and medications prescribed. But the boy resisted taking the pills and his parents were at a loss to monitor him. They did not get the support they needed from health providers, says Jude whose anger is still palpable. The doctor who prescribed anti-depressants did not inform the Platzers, opting to protect

Paula Brook



Parents hope to use their own loss to promote a healthy dialogue on the touchy issue of teen suicide.

Josh's confidentiality and later explaining that this is sometimes necessary when developing rapport with a troubled teen. Other doctors became involved, but the common message received by Jude, a registered nurse, was that she should "back off" and give Josh space.

"That would have been fine, if someone else was closely monitoring him," she says. "But it was like a conspiracy of silence — the teachers, the school counsellors, the people who saw him miss countless classes while he sat in the hall writing in his 'suicide diary' ... and his friends, who got so used to hearing him talk about death that they would joke with him about what kind of funeral he wanted. No one told us, and he fell through the cracks."

Together, the Platzers might have struggled through this rough period, says Jude, who also had a difficult time in her adolescence. Instead, Josh embraced "a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

Jude has now turned her energy to raising funds for support of troubled teens and their parents (she and her husband have set up the Josh Platzer Memorial Fund through the Vancouver Foundation) and to getting the message out — that communication can save lives. Having read about *ICE* in the newspaper, she contacted Vancouver DanceArts director Judith Marcuse and Point Grey's vice-principal Walter Mustapich and the three met at the school's gym last spring.

Marcuse's initial response was mixed: "I wanted to do it, but this needs a large open space. A gymnasium presents enormous logistical challenges. The lighting trusses won't even fit in. But Jude was persuasive."



JOSH AT 14: Josh Platzer's life and legacy will be remembered at a special performance of Vancouver DanceArts' dance drama, *ICE: beyond cool*, at Point Grey secondary school on Sept. 20 — the young man's birthday. His parents hope the performance will broaden the dialogue on teen suicides.

The piece debuted at Pacific Centre three years ago, to critical acclaim, and will appear in similar venues in the weeks ahead as the tour winds its way from Ottawa Sept. 27 to Prince George Nov. 6.

Five performances are scheduled Oct. 25 through 28 at Vancouver's International Village.

"I told Jude that Sept. 20 was the only date that would work for an open rehearsal at Point Grey," recalls Marcuse, "and she blanched. Of course, that is Josh's birthday. It gives the performance even more weight."

ICE unfolds as a kind of day-in-the-fragile-life story of a young woman. It is based on three years of workshops Marcuse conducted in Vancouver with more than 250 teenagers.

The script is by playwright John Lazarus, choreography by Marcuse and music by Graeme Coleman.

The director is Jane Heyman, head of Langara's Studio 58 theatre program, a number of

whose former students appear in the 15-member cast of young professional actors and dancers.

Integral to the performance is a talkback session at the end, where audience members are encouraged to respond. "Older people are sometimes quite shocked by what they've seen and heard," says Marcuse.

"Younger people are energized."

She describes a typical exchange:

"What can we do?" asks a parent. "Here's what," offers a teenager, grabbing the microphone and detailing the myriad stresses, fears, temptations, pressures to be "cool" and the urgent need for all that dangerous energy to find safe release.

Marcuse has set the therapeutic stage in each city by bringing health providers, educators and advocacy groups into the performance venues to direct discussion and provide support. An information brochure and local resource lists are handed

out.

"Suicide is not talked about enough. Mental illness is not talked about," says Marcuse, whose two-year battle to raise funds for the tour was almost lost to the stigma of having one's name attached to such themes. Though she earned support from governments and charitable foundations, not one corporate sponsor agreed to back *ICE* — none of the retailers who clothe the kids and no one from the cosmetics or sporting goods or music industries whose fortunes turn on those who are young and all too often desperate to be cool.

For more information on the DanceArts tour, call (toll free) 877-ICE-9111 or visit the website at www.dancearts.bc.ca. Details on the Josh Platzer Memorial Fund: 688-2204.

The Point Grey performance is by invitation to the school community only.

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