



NORMAL In Schools

By Matthew Konkol,
Milwaukee Theater Examiner

Robyn Husa Takes Eating Disorders Down for the Count through Musical Theatre

Imagine a world where no one ever dies of illness and diseases exist only in fiction. Imagine that families share everything with one another without hesitation. Imagine that the term "mental health" is something completely unnecessary and alien to our society. There's no despair, no confusion, no repression. Everyone is elated and healthy, living in an ordered, pristine, perfect universe. But our world is not a perfect one and some diseases are completely internal—hidden—until it's too late. Communication between family members often seems ample and healthy—but it's not. Parents, siblings, and friends ignore warning signs or are unaware a potential problem even exists, so diseases take lives every day.

On March 5th, 2006, 20-year old Racine, Wisconsin native Alex DeViny died of cardiac arrest. The cause was anorexia. In her teens Alex was a star athlete, a runner, who carried the torch for the Olympics. In the two years prior to her death she was in and out of hospitals for eating disorder treatment and when she died she was only 68 pounds. The main cause was a lack of understanding. Alex DeViny's story is an example of how the medical and educational system can fail.



No, ours is not a perfect world. Not perfect— but it is normal. It's normal because millions of people all over the world experience this scenario everyday. People die from diseases that are 100 percent preventable with acknowledgment of the problem and awareness of the warning signs. And creating awareness is what the program NOR-MAL in Schools (NIS) is trying to do in order to prevent more tragedies like that of Alex DeViny. NIS is a not-for-profit arts-education program that teaches kids and communities about health, wellness and the devastating impact of eating disorders through an informative curriculum and, curiously, an upbeat rock musical.

This educational up-tempo musical, performing for Wisconsin audiences, faces eating disorders head-on. Its roots lie in New York and the acting and artistic history of one Robyn Husa, the facilitator and operator of NOR-MAL in Schools. NOR-MAL has been, and continues to be, a successful theatrical and educational venture creating awareness and allowing teens and families to talk openly about feelings and problems that would otherwise remain hidden and repressed.

Husa's early performance outlets included dance and poms. After high school her family moved from Wisconsin to San Diego where she received her undergraduate theatre degree. From there she pursued her MFA in acting from the University of Virginia. It was at Virginia that Husa met Jack Cummings, with whom she found an immediate artistic connection. Post-graduate school, Husa and Cummings moved to New York and co-founded the off-Broadway theatre company Transport Group. Husa later became executive director, and in 2002 Transport produced its first show, a successful and unique musical production of *Our Town*. Other avant-garde productions followed such as *Requiem for William*, a series of William Inge one-acts, *The Audience*, a play that puts an audience on stage looking at the real paying audience, and *Cul-de-sac*, a musical comedy about three couples trying to "keep up with the Jones's." While getting Transport off the ground, Cummings' wife Barbara Walsh introduced him to writer Yvonne Adrian, composer Tom Kochan, and lyricist Cheryl Stern. Since the '90s, these three award-winning creatives had been working on an eating disorder musical based on the true story of Adrian's family and the relationship with her daughter. Cummings' sister Kathleen struggled with bulimia, so, feeling a personal connection to the show, he decided that Transport Group would produce it. Husa was excited about producing the show and the first performance of NOR-MAL was in the fall of 2005. She describes the rehearsal as an incredibly open and collaborative process with everyone directing and everyone working as a group.

Transport's five-week run of NOR-MAL received extremely high acclaim. *Variety* and *The New York Post* loved it. From there, something else took hold of Husa. It wasn't just the positive reviews that had an impression on her. She was amazed at what was happening in terms of audience reactions to show. She says little fifth graders lives were changed as a result of seeing the musical. It came out that losing weight was a game to a lot of kids, like who can show the most hip or collar bone. This reaction reminded her of the disconnect with her own mother, and Husa was filled with the overwhelming resonance that this show could have, "Kathleen [Cummings' sister] came out as a result of the show. And I thought if it can happen with Jack's family, it can happen with others." So, despite a lack of personal history with eating disorders, Husa became possessed with not wanting this experience to end or stifling the catalyst for healing that NOR-MAL could be. "This real reaction, this is what theatre is about. I became a lunatic," she says. At this time, incidently, Husa was going through a second divorce. Her husband's family was not dealing with an addiction problem. They were, in fact, terrified to talk about it. This confirmed for Husa that if families don't start dealing with their issues, things are going to eventually explode.



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Hussa's parents and sister came to New York to see the show. It was her father's idea to get NOR-MAL into the schools and her sister connected her with Greendale High School Theatre Director Eric Christiansen. From there Husa went back to the writers and started talking about an educational curriculum. Christiansen suggested bringing NOR-MAL into his advanced theatre class and entering it in Wisconsin theatre competitions. Receiving approval from Bill Hughes, the superintendent of Greendale Schools, it was Husa's intention was to oversee the production in Wisconsin before returning to Transport.

Adrian, Kochan, and Stern came to Wisconsin to work with Christiansen and the Greendale High School teens to put together a 30-minute version of NOR-MAL. The kids were ecstatic to be working with professional Broadway producers and writers. During the process, the show underwent several adaptations and modifications. One such change is the song "I'm Good, I'm Bad," that describes how the daughter is feeling as she struggles with anorexia. Kochan worked with Christiansen and the high schoolers to create this song that, prior to Wisconsin, had been just a monologue. Unbeknownst to the other people involved, Christiansen's daughter Sami was afflicted with an eating disorder at the time and he was able to tap into exactly how she was feeling and express it through the lyrics.

The 30-minute high school version of NOR-MAL won first place in multiple Wisconsin theatre competitions. The success of the production infixed Husa with the potency of the show and she knew that this was her calling; her heart was here in Wisconsin. In September of 2007 Husa wrote to Cummings in New York to tell him that she wasn't coming back.



Subsequently, the high school group qualified for a state competition with the 30-minute version and were charged with putting together a full-length version by December. The kids worked 24/7 on the project, video-documented by Logan Productions. Family after family came forward for the documentary about how much the show resonated with them. "This is me. This is me," was a phrase often repeated. Story after story came out. Christiansen came out about his daughter Sami. The musical resonated on a wide scale not limited to just eating disorders, but depression, addiction, and self-mutilation as well. Where is this problem originating, and why is it so hard to bring up? In Husa's opinion the most prominent cause of an eating disorder is what she calls a healthy self-itude, a societal pressure to be healthy and be successful at everything. Kids entering eighth grade are already being forced to think about college instead of living "in the now." School systems are putting a ridiculous amount of pressure on young people to succeed academically and in future vocations. Husa says, "The messages out there are, 'You're doomed to fail no matter what you choose to do.' Not to mention the media, emaciated models, and every other thing you see is a another diet. Kids are turning inward because there's no way to live up to the pressure that society puts on them, and they don't have the tools to ask for help. Families need to slow down, take a speed bump in their lives and talk." For recovery, Husa says getting the feelings out about the "big scary monster that is going to bring shame" and saying it out loud, is a big step to recovery. Once it's out, kids are saying 'That's what I was afraid of?' Husa has seen this same story again and again. "The musical is not the exact same story as everyone's, but in a way it is exactly the same because it's exactly the way a non-communicative family evolves."

Currently, a new group of Greendale High School students is preparing a production of NOR-MAL to present at the American High School Theatre Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland this August. In addition, the 75-minute version of the show and the educational talkback that follows is regularly performed for schools and communities in Southeastern Wisconsin by a group of adult actors. This professional version is also presented directly to eating disorder patients in treatment centers. "This has an unbelievably huge impact on their recovery," says Husa. "The patients are emotionally shut down, but the musical allows them to feel. It's an awakening and an awareness that they wouldn't other wise get. Reactions of the patients have been 'Finally there's someone who gets me. Finally there's something that understands who I am and what I've been going through. It takes me seriously, and doesn't make fun of me, doesn't make me feel shameful, or stupid, or judge me.' It's like a release. Like a burden lifted off their shoulders. 'Finally there's a tool, something to show my family, my parents or my husband what it's like to be me, what it's like through my eyes.' Patients are welled up with emotion. For some of them it's their first cathartic experience with it. And it's just unbelievable. Why our culture has taught us that it's not okay to express ourselves with real emotion is unreal to me."



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Hussa adds, "As soon as people experiencing the issue see [NOR-MAL] there's just something that happens. They're like 'I don't have to feel like a loser, I don't have to feel so ashamed any more. This is me.'" Prior to seeing the musical, people have no words or language to describe their feelings. Additionally, it educates clinicians and helps them in their understanding of the disease and to know what the patients are feeling. Education is paramount for health teachers and doctors, and this musical has created a new and effective way for medical professionals to diagnose an eating disorder. This phenomenon was a complete surprise to Husa. She never imagined this would happen, "It helps them say 'I am normal. What I'm going through is normal.'"

For the future of NOR-MAL, there's a planned DVD series that will be used to market the show and help to circumvent the reticence administrators and clinicians feel when they hear about a musical concerning eating disorders. The tendency is to shove it under the rug and the level of understanding is sub-par, even at eating disorder conferences. As Husa puts it, everyone is misinformed and ignorant and there exists a severe lack of awareness, even from the medical professionals. The DVD series is a way to create a more streamlined, sound-byte type informational packet.

To finance the DVD project, a group of people have been assembled with the express purpose of supporting the cause and raising funds. The committee includes Dr. Laura Lees (overseer of the NIS program and curriculum), Eric Christiansen, NOR-MAL actress Amy Geysler, former Miss America Kirsten Haglund, a state senator, an attorney, and various artistic and technical professionals. A benefit party is planned in February of 2010. People sympathetic to the NOR-MAL mission from all walks- marketers, life coaches, therapists, and those with personal connections to the disease, are dedicating hours of time to raise the \$200,000 necessary to produce the DVDs.

The whole process has been very artistically satisfying for Husa and life-changing for everyone involved. "Except maybe *Our Town*, I don't know of another project I've ever seen or felt or been involved with artistically where I've seen this kind of thing happen on such a profound level. This takes the number one spot," she says.

Live theatre is the best and perhaps the only way to create a substantial and effective awareness about the disease because other mediums and educational attempts have had a minimal impact. A testimonial about Alex DeVinnny from Greendale High School teacher Terri Tessmann puts this sharply and succinctly, "This was a vibrant 20-year old who played soccer with my daughter. She was artistic, a state champion high school runner, and a truly great person. I wonder if seeing something such as NOR-MAL might have made a difference. Nothing else could."

For more information and to find out ways you can get involved in NORMAL in Schools or to bring the theatrical presentation NOR-MAL to your school or community, visit www.normalinschools.org, email Robyn at rhussa@normalinschools.org, or write to NORMAL in Schools at P.O. Box 20965 Milwaukee, WI 53220.

