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## Redefining "normal" to educate, build empowerment

February 25th, 2011 | By Erin Petersen

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The obsession with body image is evidenced in nearly every aspect of popular culture. From reality shows like *Bridalplasty* and *Extreme Makeover*, to the billions of dollars spent each year on diet and rapid weight-loss products, we are a society with utmost concern for aesthetics.

It can be argued that the pursuit of a smaller waistline or toned glutes is decidedly "normal" — but what exactly does that word mean in this context, and at what point does it become something else?



Normal in Schools founder Robyn Hussa

Robyn Hussa created Normal in Schools (NIS) to confront just such a question. Founded in 2005 (though officially formed in 2007), NIS is a national non-profit based out of Milwaukee that travels the country to educate students about eating disorders using the therapeutic power of the arts.

The program goes directly to schools and colleges and produces *Normal*, a live, musical theatre piece that communicates messages about body image, self esteem, obesity and disordered eating.

Hussa, who holds a Master of Fine Arts in Acting, explains how her art background inspired this hands-on approach to activism.

"In theater, you learn about your body and movement and the importance of your voice. I never knew that these tools would be useful in coping, but those skills can provide a lot of respite for people dealing with intense stress," she says.

She says that the wheels began to turn in 2005 when she produced the first *Normal* performance and afterward brought in psychiatrists and clinicians for a talk-back with the middle-school aged audience, in which many students opened up for the first time about their own struggles. From there came the impetus to bring the show to an even wider audience, using the arts as a preventative measure to curtail the development of unhealthy habits.

Since then, Hussa and NIS have traveled to schools and treatment centers, using the live performance as a means to spread awareness for eating disorders and mental health issues in an effort to stem the development of unhealthy habits and attitudes in young adults. The show is designed to teach students, parents and teachers how to utilize various creative outlets like music, dance, and even yoga as a way to cope with stress. Originally, NIS was geared toward 7th-9th graders as part of their health class curriculum, but as the project evolves, Hussa says that the NIS message resonates with a larger spectrum, from parents and teachers, and even children as young as 10 years old.

Hussa says that in the years since its inception, the live production has given many students the courage to speak up about their own personal struggles.

"We've conducted surveys, and more than 45% of those



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struggling with mental health issues are inspired to come forward and talk about it ... they feel empowered," she says.

In the U.S. , over 10 million women and 1 million men currently suffer from anorexia or bulimia, and millions more struggle with binge eating disorders. In findings reported by the [National Eating Disorders Association](#), over one half of teenage girls and one-third of boys admit to using unhealthy weight control behaviors like skipping meals, smoking cigarettes, taking laxatives or vomiting.



*From a production of "Nor-mal" at UW-Madison. All photos courtesy NIS.*

In even younger children, reports show that 42 % of girls in grades 1-3 say they want to be thinner. The statistics for college-aged men and women are just as staggering.

There are many factors at play — between entertainment media, which is saturated with unhealthy and unrealistic depictions of body image, depression and anxiety among teens can also manifest themselves as other unhealthy behaviors. And that is why NIS takes a comprehensive, well-rounded approach in confronting these issues.

A portion of the program deals with media literacy, in a collaboration with the National Eating Disorder Association and the Center for Media Literacy. There are activities designed to help students understand that the portrayals of beauty on television and in magazines are not always what they seem. Husa describes one exercise in which students attempt to make a life-size model of Barbie to proportion, only to realize that if the iconic character were human, she literally wouldn't be able to stand or walk. It not only shows teens how much of what they see in entertainment media is manufactured, but how those ideals are not in keeping with maintaining a healthy lifestyle.



And In the age of technology, where it seems we are all plugged in 24/7, Husa advocates for time away from cell phones and Facebook, creating time to focus on creative pursuits which will help boost self esteem.

"It greatly affects children when there is a constant stream of feedback and information," she says. "A big push is in getting kids to have downtime."

In honor of National Eating Disorder Awareness Week, NIS has been traveling across the state,

bringing the live performance and a host of resources to schools, sororities and health organizations. Husa says that the response have been overwhelmingly positive, with many audience members coming forward to talk about their own experiences.

"I think we are a true cheerleader for the hope that a full recovery is possible from any of these illnesses," she says. "This helps bridge a community for them, where they don't feel so alone."

These week-long events culminate with the [Inside Out](#) fundraiser gala on Saturday, held at Milwaukee's own Turner Hall Ballroom. The event is a funky pastiche of visual and performance art, music and spoken word, followed by drinks, dancing and a silent auction. The proceeds go to support NIS programs and also its new film, *Speaking out about ED*, which documents the rise of eating disorders among young men and women, but also explores holistic preventative measures.

"As a culture, we're asking folks to ask themselves 'What is normal?' This pressure cooker environment contributes to the sense of hopelessness that creates this epidemic," says Husa. "With more than half of teen girls and almost one-third of teen boys currently engaged in unhealthy weight control behavior, there is a critical need for eating disorder awareness and the kind of support we bring to this vulnerable population."

For more information on NIS or Saturday's *Inside Out* gala, [click here](#).

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