

Seattlestar.net Mother for you I made this:

The Art of Changing How We Talk About Mental Disorders

Written by Eve Green. Published on May 15 2013



Photo by Anthony Rigano

I want to explore and be inspired by new ideas and new thoughts. I'm most happy challenging myself, whether that's with something that I know or something that I have no understanding of.
— Ezra Dickinson

A Rising Star

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and contemporary dancer Ezra Dickinson is bringing his very personal story to the streets of Seattle in an effort to stir up the conversation. Dickinson, who is being heralded as a "rising star" of the Seattle dance scene, grew up with a mother who was a diagnosed schizophrenic. Ezra grew up in Bellingham and studied on full scholarship until the age of twenty before enrolling at Cornish College. His mother, a ballet teacher, enrolled him in dance classes at the age of four years old and supported him through his studies at the Pacific Northwest Ballet. About ten years ago the young dancer received a call from his mother that pushed him to make his story public. The call was from his mother whose health had deteriorated to the point that she was now living on the streets. This became the impetus behind his new work, *Mother for you I made this*.

Street Art Fit for the Stage

In a series of short solo performances, Ezra brings his audience out onto the streets, rain or shine, to share his mother's story. Each performance is staged as an intimate event in the largest of public theatres, the street. The performance starts outside the Greyhound bus station, and moves through the streets of Seattle, which sets the real life backdrop for his true story. His set also includes the plaza of the US District Courthouse and a nearby parking garage. At the parking garage a projection is installed to help set the scene. His choice to perform on the streets where his mother lived, while keeping his audience limited to 20 people, allows him to share his complex and emotional experience in an intimate but powerful way. His hope is to use his art to tell his experience and add some momentum in the conversation about mental health, in particular, the lack of resources available to those who suffer from this illness across the United States.

Members of the audience receive a wireless headset with a soundtrack that mixes sounds from the street, industrial noise and music, into conversations staged between him and his mother. It is no coincidence that the soundtrack composed by Seattle composer Paul Walsh, can only be heard within the audience's head.

Dancing Away Social Stigma

According to Dr. Wayne Lindstrom, CEO of Mental Health America, the mass shootings in America over the past year have helped to bring awareness of mental health issues to the forefront of public awareness. That said, he warns that people with mental disorders are more likely to be the victims of violence than to perpetrate it. The shame and stigma of mental diseases often stop families from talking about it and seeking help. People see it as a weakness of character, or imagine that those with a mental disease are somehow different from them. The reality though is that anyone can suffer from a mental disease at any point of their life.

The National Institute of Mental Health reports that 26.2 % of people over the ages of 18 and older suffer from a mental health issue each year in America. Mental disorders are the leading cause of disability in the U.S. and as many as 1 in 17 people suffer from a serious mental disorder. Mental disorders can include mood disorders such as bipolar disease and suicide, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism and personality disorders. To make matters more complicated, according to the Journal of the American Medical Association, half of individuals with severe mental disorders also suffer from problems with substance abuse. As many as 37 percent of alcohol abusers and 53 percent of drug abusers are also reported have at least one serious mental illness. Recovery centers across the country, such as Connecticut Drug & Alcohol Detox Center, offer solutions but only address part of the problem. Imagine a child in the position of Ezra, growing up with a mother suffering from schizophrenia. What resources might have been available for him were her disease not so stigmatized? Mother for you I made this asks us all: can we follow Ezra's example? Are we finally ready to talk more openly about mental disorders?