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LIFESTYLE

Great Minds: Improv invaluable to brain injury survivors at Krempels Center

Katie MacKinnon Krempels Center

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PORTSMOUTH - On Wednesday mornings, members of Krempels Center – the nonprofit community organization that provides quality programs and services to people living with brain injury in the Seacoast region and beyond – are welcome to take part in an improv-style class called “Let’s Make A Scene.” The benefit of the class is two-fold. Krempels Center members work on their personal skillsets and comfort levels in social and novel situations, as well as practice being part of a team to create something together.

Led by Craig Werth, Krempels Center group facilitator since 2016, the group is expected to hold a safe space for creative expression and fun. Werth has a personal affection for improv and similar games with brain injury survivors interacting in creative ways and learning how to adapt their communication.

“One member reported that she used to be anxious showing up to work because she didn’t know what might happen in her job and it changed all the time,” Werth shared. “After improv classes, her anxiety about that diminished greatly – she knew she could handle the unexpected better.”

Before March 2020, the improv group gathered in person at the Community Campus in Portsmouth. Now, the group meets virtually on Zoom. One benefit to going online is that members have direct visibility to one another by easily seeing all the participants’ faces as they communicate and hearing each other “up close” – which equalizes opportunity.

In a recent improv group, eight members were asked to look around their physical space and pick an object to bring up to the camera. With that object, the members were asked to make something up about it that’s not true. To kick it all off, Werth held up a pencil and called it the “biggest match he has ever seen!” followed by a short antidote. Letting go of the usual and inviting creativity in, members each took turns with their objects. One member held up an action figure holding a spiky wand and proceeded to describe the object as the cuddliest

teddy bear in the world. Another member used a rock as his object but described in playful detail how it was actually an alien spaceship he discovered while walking in the park. In addition to rising to the challenge, members engaged in creative play with one another, which supports relaxation, stress relief and other positive outcomes.

As a non-profit, Krempels Center relies on interns to be able to support the variety of therapeutic groups offered to members each program day. The improv group is no exception and is typically co-led by an intern who leverages evidence-based practice and creative thinking to help guide member participation. Krempels Center Intern Cori Ianni, Occupational Therapy Doctorate (OTD) student at MGH Institute of Health Professions, co- led a recent group with Werth for the first time. Ianni shared that she loved the improv group, and it even pushed her to work on the fly just like the members who had to be flexible with their responses. Ianni's goals are to continue working with people to improve or maintain their brain functions, including emotions, thought processes, memory, speech and planning. The improv class at Krempels Center certainly helps in all those areas.

In response to public health restrictions last spring, all Krempels Center programs shifted online. The organization remains steady as an example of innovation. Krempels Center continues to reach many of its members and connect with new brain injury survivors who are joining the program virtually. Support from the community has been a key component to Krempels Center's evolution to a virtual platform.

Join an upcoming virtual Fireside Chat to see firsthand the community and fellowship that is Krempels Center. For more information and to register, visit www.krempelscenter.org/fireside-chats.

Krempels Center's mission is to improve the lives of adults living with acquired brain injury. Established in 2000, Krempels Center has built a reputation for offering high-quality, therapeutic programs for brain injury survivors. Located at the Community Campus in Portsmouth, the Center is unique to the Seacoast; in fact, it is the only service of its kind in New Hampshire, and only one of a few in the country. Brain injury survivors often experience difficulty returning to their previous roles at work, home, and in the community. Krempels Center offers opportunities for social connection, skill building, and exploration of new life interests to improve quality of life following brain injury. In this vibrant learning community, survivors heal through shared experiences, peer support, and therapeutic programming. Research in partnership with the University of New Hampshire has shown Krempels Center members have higher quality of life, lower stress, and stronger social

connectedness than typical brain injury survivors. Visit www.krempelscenter.org to find out more about Krempels Center.