



JEFFERSON COUNTY EDUCATIONAL SERVICE CENTER

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OhioRISE works with theater helping people find their voice

COLUMBIANA – OhioRISE was on-hand to celebrate a special group of people who took to the stage after a lot of hard work and community support.

OhioRISE care coordinator Andrea Andruszewicz joined other community partners at the Squeaky Wheel Theater Company for the special needs production of Alice in Wonderland Jr. The show was Nov. 8-10.

Jefferson County Educational Service Center (JCESC) OhioRISE (Resilience through Integrated Systems and Excellence) is a Medicaid managed care program for children and youth with complex behavioral health and multisystem needs in Columbiana, Belmont, Carroll, Harrison, Jefferson, Monroe, Stark and Tuscarawas Counties and operated by the Jefferson County Educational Service Center. OhioRISE was formed to coordinate resources and put families in touch with what is available.

Andruszewicz said OhioRISE is very familiar with the theater and its benefits, including opportunities to socialize and work together.

“Sometimes when you have a special need such as autism, a behavioral need comes along with that, so we can get involved in the home, get them more resources if they don’t already have it. It’s a good thing for the community, the theater is, because it brings everyone together and it informs the community of adults and children with special needs, because a lot of people aren’t familiar with it. So I use it as a resource with my OhioRISE families.”

OhioRISE care coordinators are very involved with the communities where they work and often receive referrals from their community partners. The care coordinators are adept at finding resources and outlets like the theater to connect with their clients, as well as finding funding to facilitate their participation, although the special needs program is free.

OhioRISE care coordinator supervisor Maryalice Surgenavicz is a long-time volunteer and is on the theater company board. She said OhioRISE has found participation can build a gamut of skills such as expressive language and communication through music.

“We have had several youths be involved with Squeaky Wheel company in summer drama camps and a youth that was involved with Squeaky Wheel through the special needs production. We had five youth participate in summer drama camp,” Surgenavicz said. “We were able to use OhioRISE Flex funding to pay the money to participate in camp.”

Andruszewicz works with another client without special needs who she connected with the theater to perform other plays. The young person found this a valuable coping mechanism, and the family became more involved in the community and formed some strong friendships.

Surgenavicz recounted a mother with a child the program connected to the theater. The positive influence has helped the mother in her fight against substance abuse.

“She has been clean now for about a year. She credits her sobriety to being part of such a good community.” Erich Offenburg, theater manager and executive director of the Squeaky Wheel Theater Company, has worked closely with Surgenavicz. They hold performances for people with special needs twice a year, with the next ones to be scheduled for May and October.

Offenburg was intrigued by the OhioRISE program, adding it can mesh well with the theater’s mission, and theater

itself is a valuable activity for young people OhioRISE is helping. He has seen these improvements firsthand. “While being in a show can be a very stressful thing, the overall process of theater build confidence and it’s awesome for mental health,” he said. “You learn to deal with stress in a positive way. Being able to do something positive and gain confidence and just have the support of folks that come to see you in a show, it’s an amazing thing for mental health.”

OhioRISE also took the opportunity to inform audience members of the program. One attendee was Crystal Sicklesmith a dispatcher with the Columbiana County Sheriff’s Office and a member of the county’s crisis intervention team. Sicklesmith expressed interest in OhioRISE. While law enforcement arrives first during a crisis, more help is often needed afterward and OhioRISE can offer connections to those tools.

“We also try to get any of the needs that they need met at a later time or during that time,” she said. Sicklesmith noted the importance of sharing word of available services. “So many people don’t know the resources we have, and we need more, but we’re starting. We’re getting there.”

Noah Chase, who works with the social youth ministry Highway Unlimited, also saw opportunities in OhioRISE. “There is a lot out there that people don’t know about. They really need to take advantage of everything, the assistance,” he said. “We need to help them. We need to show them. We need all the support we can get in this community, and I try my best to educate people.”

Chase recalled seeing a loved one go through multiple surgeries.

“You want to do everything you can to help, in any capacity, and you see other people’s families go through similar things, and they don’t know there’s assistance available. You just want to give them everything.”

Others were able to learn about OhioRISE and seek referrals for children or grandchildren.

OhioRISE also strengthened ties with local partners Goodness Grows and Heroes and Halos.

To learn more about OhioRISE, call 740-792-4011, email ohiorise.info@jcsc.org or visit OhioRISE online at <https://www.jcsc.k12.oh.us/CareManagementEntity.aspx>.

Photo Cutline:

OhioRISE care coordinator Andrea Andrusiewicz is joined by Erich Offenburg, theater manager and executive director of the Squeaky Wheel Theater Company, for the special needs production of Alice in Wonderland Jr. Nov. 8-10. An OhioRISE care coordinator supervisor is on the theater board and has found theater an effective outlet and way to build skills for the young people OhioRISE helps.

