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CATHY, a singer with the group Toonfoolery.

Mental health through song

By Bryan Wagoner
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CAMBRIDGE – A group of area residents has been challenging the stigma surrounding mental illness, not with words, but with music. The group calls itself Toonfoolery.

Founded in 1994 to give persons with psychiatric disabilities a creative outlet, Toonfoolery has taken its 28-member ensemble to some 140 performances in front of nearly 7,000 people.

“Toonfoolery is based on the model of empowerment,” said Theresa Thompson, artistic director. “This project gives members the power of realization of their talent.”

Despite their disabilities, all of the group members are talented musicians.

“Most of the artists have some type of psychiatric disability,” said Thompson. “They have quite incredible collective loneliness, and many are estranged from their families. They are part of a system that has labeled them chronic.”

Almost all the musicians feel pigeon-holed in some way by their society and some by their families. Some did not want their real names used and several wanted only their first name used because of the stigmas often associated with those who have their illnesses, which include schizophrenia and manic depression.

“There is a common thread running throughout the mental health system and that is the stigma placed upon mental illness,” said Cathy, a singer with the group.

“Through this group, we have the chance to challenge those prejudices leveled against us.”

Toonfoolery seeks to challenge that system, not by giving lectures about mental illness, but by playing great music. Thompson and others said one of the group’s main performance goals is to dispel myths about mental illness.

“As we play and encourage discussion, we have the chance to help debunk some of the stereotypes about mental illness,” said Harvey, a Toonfoolery pianist and trombonist. “Then people have a better image of us as performers.”

Paul Thompson, a self-taught guitarist (no relation to Theresa), agreed: “The key to debunking stereotypes is communication.”

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Music eases road to mental health

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Toonfoolery is far more than a music therapy group. A recent concert tackled with finesse everything from Bob Dylan to Handel and Peruvian melodies and a rousing rendition of Hava Nagila.

"One of the things that makes us stand out is the artistic merit of what we do," Theresa Thompson said. "We are professional musicians, and all of the members are paid for performing. We believe that all members can and will succeed, and that's why it works."

For some in the group, Toonfoolery is the first opportunity for musical expression they have had since school.

Harvey, who attended Berklee College of Music, said, "The group has been really helpful in my self-esteem and in my playing."

Another member, Freecam, has a degree in viola from Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y., and has recently released an ethereal CD of synthesized recorder and vocals.

"This has been a really great avenue for me to get out and play for supportive audiences," she said.

Most of the performers feel their participation in the group has given them not only a renewed sense of self-worth, but also a stronger feeling of commitment and incentive to realize their talents.

Margaret, who plays recorder, said that practicing and performing added discipline to her life and made her feel a heightened sense of responsibility. Bill, another pianist, added, "You have to force yourself at first, but once you do, you find out how much fun it can be."

Toonfoolery has provided the musicians with a forum to share their talents, and has become a significant milestone toward healing their illnesses.

Martin Koch, a guitarist and vocalist as well as the group's concert manager, said, "Toonfoolery gives us a context for our music so that we aren't so focused on ourselves but on our performances. This has been a long-term dream of mine. It really fulfills me."

Toonfoolery seeks to fill in some of the gaps that many see in the mental health system today.

"Mental health providers are trained to look at pathology, but what is lacking is looking at people's strengths and abilities," Theresa Thompson said. "While there isn't always a cure for every illness, healing and recovery are possible. What Toonfoolery does is to open them up to the possibility of healing and recovery."

"I have really seen incredible growth come out of this. One person, who, after working here for a year, had the courage to interview for volunteer and then paid em-

ployment."

Everyone in the group agreed their involvement with music had been a blessing.

"Music has been a place to let go some of my emotions," Cathy said. "It is a real outlet for me."

Added Bill, "Music has helped me to deal with my illness and helped me to crystallize my feelings."

"We all have a similar problem in that we don't have much structure to our time," said Paul Thompson. "Toonfoolery has helped me come out of that rut that I had been in. It allows me to see direct results and it has really helped me to get back on my feet again."

The majority of Toonfoolery's concerts are in front of people with little or no other exposure to the arts.

"We try to provide underserved populations with access to the arts, in hospitals, retirement homes, outpatient psychiatric centers," said Theresa Thompson.

"We pick up audiences that usually don't have any music provided for them," said Victor, who plays clarinet.

Paul Thompson added, "We offer a service to others with psychiatric disabilities in that we provide them hope that they can go out and succeed as well."

They do, however, perform for the general public as well. For example, a show is scheduled for Saturday, April 4, at 8:30 p.m., at the Undercroft Coffee House at St. Peter's Church in Central Square, Cambridge. Admission is $5.

Some members of the group go into area schools. They performed for a group of fifth and sixth graders in Sharon last year.

"We played and then talked about what it was like to live with mental illness," Theresa Thompson said. The group is planning another performance in the Sharon schools.

Toonfoolery started with four members and has since blossomed to 28.

"It has been great to watch the evolution of the group, like a perennial flower," said Kathy Benforado, one of the group's coaches. "To look back at where we have come from is inspiring."

The group now boasts both performers and students. Members offer 10 workshops yearly for training and hold regular coffeehouse performances. They now have three paid administrators to handle their 50-plus concerts per year and their operating budget of $36,000.

Toonfoolery receives a combination of public and private funding, including from the Department of Mental Health and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. For further information about the group, call 576-6570.