Pupils learn about mental health issues

In an attempt to chisel away at the walls of the stigma surrounding mental illness, Cottage Street Schools Abilities and Challenges Programs recently presented "Tunefoolery Concert Ensembles". Established in 1994, Tunefoolery is comprised of a group of talented musicians who are also mental health consumers (i.e. receive mental health services).

Through the efforts of health educator Tim Vigorito, the fifth and sixth graders learned about various mental health issues. This information served as a foundation to understand the focus of Tunefoolery — how people with mental illness can access and share their talents to become role models for others.

Tunefoolery has performed over 100 concerts to over 7,000 people who usually have limited access to the arts, such as nursing homes and mental health treatment centers. This was the first program designed for a school and their first interactive program, in which mental health issues were discussed. Students learned about many famous artists, musicians and politicians who dealt with mental illness in their daily lives, including Edgar Allen Poe, Emily Dickenson, Handel and Lincoln. And then there was the music — Klezmer, folk and rock and roll — which the children wanted more of.

"Tunefoolery was truly impressed with the openness and acceptance that the Cottage Street students showed in this discussion of what in the adult world is considered a sensitive subject.

This program preceded Children's Mental Health Week, May 4 to 10. Mental illnesses, which are biochemically-mediated disorders, occur in children also. As misunderstood as mental illness is for adults, it is painfully more misunderstood in children. Programs like Tunefoolery mark the beginning of a new social era in which people with mental illness will be accepted, understood and afforded the opportunity to showcase and command respect for their many talents.

The Cottage Street Abilities and Challenges program is a PTO-run and funded program designed to teach children about various disabilities, in an attempt to improve attitudes regarding persons with disabilities, develop a realistic understanding of what it is like to live with a disability and to open the door to real friendships and respect for those with various disabilities. Tunefoolery is funded by the Department of Mental Health's Office of Consumer and Ex-patient Relations. This project is also funded, in part, by the Cambridge Arts Council, a local agency; the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency; and the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional funding comes from the Polaroid Foundation, John Hancock Financial Services and individual donors.

Tunefoolery is a consumer-run program of North Charles', Inc. Cambridge/Somerville Social Club.