

Play Hopes to Spark Real Solutions

By Kareemah Dennis

What do theater and public health have in common? Jason Craig, a PhD student of the University of South Carolina's Health, Promotion, Education and Behavior (HPEB) believes the answer is creating community driven solutions to address childhood obesity.

Craig is a Graduate Assistant for the Childhood Obesity Prevention in SC Communities (COPASCities) program and has fifteen years experience of being involved in theater.

The goals of the COPASCities program include building capacity for professional leaders and volunteers of local food coalitions to develop practice-based evidence for community-based childhood obesity prevention through training institutes, said Sonya Jones, Principal investigator of the COPASCities program and Deputy Director of the Center for Research in Nutrition and Health Disparities and a faculty member in the Department of Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior.

Craig is currently involved in planning sessions for the training institutes that will engage community members' imaginations, while using story-telling methods, to generate approaches to creating healthier food systems.

"Identifying, sharing, and performing stories are central activities in good grass roots community organizing. It seems to be a fairly logical leap to develop trainings using these same activities," Craig said.

The idea of using theater techniques is to engage the community to use the creative side of their brain that may not get tapped into in traditional ways of meeting. "With these techniques you are creating stories without suggested answers", says Craig.

He further explains that participants will use their own life experiences to help create story-lines. However, instead of resolving a story with a conclusion, it will instead be cut short at the point of the conflict or dilemma. The process then provides opportunities to interact with and examine the dilemma from multiple perspectives, offering ideas and tools for addressing issues that have been brought forward.

"Most of the dilemmas we've been hearing about from people working towards food systems change are very similar to dilemmas in our own local communities that want to be stronger and healthier. It

Key Points

- The COPASCities program will host training institutes to help local food coalitions build capacity to make food system changes in their community to prevent childhood obesity.
- Jason Craig, a doctoral student in HPEB, will use theater techniques at the training institutes .
- Theater techniques will include methods that use story-telling, listening, performing to help community members generate ideas about creating healthier food systems.

often boils down to issues around who has access to, control over, and responsibility for a healthy food system. If we do the work well, then the answer to that question becomes ‘We all do,’” said Craig.

Craig explained, “A key element to the process is listening. One technique would begin with two individuals listening to one another’s stories or experiences while honoring these experiences by turning them into mini-performances. This act of working and creating something together can be re-performed with more people who also actively engage in the performance.

Craig adds, “this act has the potential to remind us that where we started out as two individuals sharing a story, we are now a group of people building a performance together and that one person’s story is now **Our** story, and this becomes the story of how **We** work together to create the world we hope to live in”.

Craig is working from ideas developed by Augusto Boal¹, Michael Rohd², and Richard Owen Geer³ and some on campus mentors include Dr. Peter Duffy, Assistant Professor and head of the Master of Arts in Teaching Program and Theatre Education and Dr. Deborah Billings, Assistant Professor of the Department of Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior.

COPASCities’ partner communities will have an opportunity to learn more about the theater techniques during the training institutes during the spring of 2013.

“The more we become able to become a child again, to keep ourselves childlike, the more we can understand that because we love the world and we are open to understanding, to comprehension, that when we kill the child in us, we are no longer.”
— [Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*](#)

¹ Boal , Augusto. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. Routledge, 1992. Print.

² Rohd , Michael. *Theatre for Community Conflict and Dialogue: The Hope is Vital Training Manual*. 1st ed. Heinemann, 1998. Print.

³ Geer, Richard, and Jules Corriere. *Story Bridge: From Alienation to Community Action*. Community Performance Inc., 1997. Print.