

Café Series gives chance for people to reconnect with themselves

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By Brock Weir

Screaming on the street corner might not be the most “socially acceptable” way of expressing one’s self, but doing so with a guitar in hand, and set to a bit of a melody? Well, now you’re talking.

This is the feeling kept in mind by occupational therapist Michelle Scott as she helps facilitate the music therapy program at Eating Disorders of York Region’s Riverwalk Wellness Centre’s music therapy series. Based on Yonge Street, just south of Wellington Street in the historic post office building, Riverwalk is planning to take their therapeutic sounds out from under the clock tower and into the community to spread the healing power of music.

“The purpose of the shows is to raise awareness about the agency all over York Region but also to engage people and let them know there is support out there and, in an accessible way, share arts and music for people in the community who wouldn’t otherwise have those opportunities,” says Ms. Scott of the first installment of Riverwalk’s Café Series, which bows Saturday, February 28, from 6 – 9 p.m. at Books, Café and Things on Main Street Newmarket.

The second installment in March moves to Aurora at Bonsai Hill.

“In the Riverwalk community we have a really awesome group of musicians who have

performed at Songs to Recovery (Riverwalk's annual benefit concert)," says Ms. Scott. "In the past, we have put on more visual arts shows, but we thought why not put on a concert? In our music program, people just love music as a form of self-expression. Sometimes we will have a free jam, sometimes I will bring my guitar and we'll look up chords on the internet for popular songs, and just sing and play percussion. It's a really fun way to bring people together."

Riverwalk prides itself on providing a "non-judgemental" venue for their clients to express themselves. Whether it is their music programs, or their visual arts programs, there are often people who come in saying "I'm not an artist," or, "I'm not going to create something worthwhile or good."

Job number one for people like Michelle is to make these thoughts things of the past.

"We emphasize that it is not really about the product, it is not really about what you're going to create in the end, how accessible it is, or if you have an audience," says Michelle, "it is more about the process of creating something and allowing yourself the ability to make mistakes and try out new things without the feeling there is judgement placed on you."

So far, the program has attracted people ranging from the age of 18, to those nearing their seventies, just there to have fun and express themselves.

Ms. Scott says she knew from an early age the power of music as a personal outlet. For most millennials, "Sharon, Lois and Bram" was the first album listened to all the way through. But, once this rite of passage was out of the way, the next album Ms. Scott took in all the way through was Pink Floyd's "The Wall."

"From a very young age listening to music and hearing other people sing and write about things that are really challenging connected with me," she says. "We live in a society that operates under a logical, positivist kind of philosophy which is super important, but also all that Right Brain stuff is really important too. In order to be a whole, complete person, you don't necessarily have to be an artist per se, but being able to engage in the more playful, creative, imaginative side of ourselves is kind of integral to overall mental wellness – not just preventing mental illness, but promoting mental wellness in a positive sense.

"I think there are conceptions that art therapy and music therapy are kind of wishy-washy, hand-wavy, 'go bury your crystals at the bottom of a mountain' kinds of things, but it is quite well supported in research nowadays."

In the end, the new Café Series is about raising awareness about Riverwalk and the services they provide, about showing the York Region community that anyone who is dealing with struggles and life stresses is able to come to a place to hear from people who are dealing with the same thing and, in the end, they can try their hand at "engaging creatively and engaging with others in a safe space."

"It is a way of helping people know their complete selves," says Ms. Scott. "It is about having a full soul and a full heart and realising that you're a full person. It is important to honour that playful, imaginative aspect of ourselves that is all too often forgotten when we're running here and there and stressing out. It is important for people to reconnect with that part of themselves."

For more on Riverwalk and the Café Series, visit www.edoyr.com.

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