

MicheLee Puppets and the Fight Against Child Obesity



Robert Wood Johnson
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DIGBY DIEHL

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Editors' Introduction

Many programs funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation aim at changing policy or developing innovative programs that have the potential to be picked up by government and expanded throughout the nation. Others have the more modest aspiration of simply trying to improve the health or health care of individuals. MicheLee Puppets, which is funded by the Foundation's Local Funding Partners program, is one of the latter—in particular, helping Florida schoolchildren lead healthier lives.

The Foundation long ago discovered that television, movies and celebrities can be employed to deliver health messages. It is only a small step for puppets to do the same thing, following the lead of the Muppets, who have been educating young children since 1969.

As Digby Diehl, most recently the co-author with Bob Barker of *Priceless Memories* and a frequent contributor to the *Anthology* series, recounts in chapter 10, MicheLee Puppets travel throughout Florida, providing an entertaining—even rollicking—show for the state's schoolchildren. But the show is not just fun and entertainment. The puppets highlight ways that elementary schoolchildren can eat more nutritious food and be healthier. And the children bring that message home to their parents. MicheLee Puppets mesh nicely with the Foundation's priority of reducing the epidemic of childhood obesity in the nation.

If any readers are doubtful about the potential of puppet power, we urge them to watch the video of MicheLee troupe's Rico B. Kuhl's hip-hop rendition of *I Drinky Water*. It can be found on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrXXcyrrTqE. Once you've seen *I Drinky Water*, you'll think twice about drinking cola again.

It may seem preposterous to suggest that puppets can change the world, but puppets working for change pop into every nook, cranny, classroom, fireside, community hall, street, hospital room, refugee tent, doctor's office, and church around the world... A puppet's power is its inherent nature to "become" anything it's designed to be. Puppets synthesize ideas. They are the essence of a thought, concept or character. They can teach without qualifications, model without ego, express without consequences. They can speak for us as a proxy... When used with young audiences, they, being small themselves, can encourage children to face bigger things.

Wendy Passmore-Godfrey
Artistic Director
W. P. Puppet Theater Society¹

Since 1985 MicheLee Puppets in Orlando, Fla., has harnessed puppet power to bring educational theater to students in Florida schools. Its mission is “empowering lives through the art of puppetry,” and over the last twenty-four years MicheLee Puppets has performed for more than 1.4 million children. With a repertoire that ranges from large, sophisticated stage productions to intimate performances for preschoolers, its offerings cover a wide range of challenging subject matter, including bullying, disability, divorce, nutrition, preserving the environment, global warming, literacy, and sexual assault.

The art of puppetry is as old as human history itself. Marionettes dating back to 2000 B.C. have been unearthed in both the Indus Valley and ancient Egypt, but other evidence suggests that puppetry may go back as far as 30,000 years—quite literally back to the Stone Age. European puppetry is rooted in the *commedia dell’arte* of the Italian Renaissance. Punch and Judy, *commedia*’s most famous British offshoot, dates back to the time of Samuel Pepys (1662), and eventually crossed the Atlantic to the New World. In the United States, the contemporary use of puppets for education blended with entertainment is embedded in the childhood memories of anyone old enough to remember *Howdy Doody*, *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*, Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop, or *Sesame Street*.

Since its inception, MicheLee Puppets has been using puppet theater to improve the lives of its audiences. The story of a little girl named Jacquee demonstrates the impact its performances can have. “We have a burn survivor puppet,” says MicheLee Puppets’ founder and executive director, Tracey Conner. “We do re-entry programs for children who have been burned, when they go back to school. A few years ago, I got a call from the Burn Unit at the Orlando Regional Medical Center. There was a little girl named Jacquee who was going to a brand-new school, which is tough enough when you look like all the other kids, but Jacquee had been badly disfigured in a fire.

“They asked us to bring Lynne, our burn puppet, to the school. We were there on Jacquee’s second day. We set up in the library, with about 150 3rd graders seated on the floor. In front of them was just a table and a puppet, and we did our skit. The children got to ask Lynne questions about how she got burned, and how she felt about it. Just about every hand was up. They all wanted to talk to her and ask her questions about her situation. Finally, we pulled back and stepped aside, and Jacquee was introduced.

“She was this little tiny girl, and they placed a chair in front of all these kids. She bravely sat there and told her story. She explained that she and her brother and a cousin had been playing in a bonfire. One of the boys had picked up a stick and thrown it at her, and it caught her clothes on fire. ‘I rolled on the ground, but I couldn’t put the fire out in time,’ she said. I remember a tear running down her cheek. You could have heard a pin drop on the carpet. The kids were just entranced with her.

“And then they got to ask her questions, which was magical. One of the kids wanted to know whether she was still mad at her brother and her cousin. Another wanted to know whether they came to see her in the hospital. These were sensitive, caring questions. After all that interchange was over, the kids all stood up and surrounded her and started hugging her.

“That was her second day of school. On her first day, nobody would talk to her. It wasn’t because the children were mean. It was because they didn’t understand. And the difference between Day 1 and Day 2 was a puppet.

“What we’re doing is helping to create good little citizens,” Conner says. “We’re about teaching kids values at a young age, to inculcate those qualities so that when they grow up they are better human beings, and they are able to make healthy choices for themselves and to be respectful of other people.”

Conner got into puppetry pretty much by accident. “I was in college in Ohio, at Bowling Green State University, studying acting and directing,” she says. “I assumed that I would have a career onstage after I graduated. In my senior year, the local school district hired two of us theater students to go out and tour their schools with a set of Kids on the Block puppets.” The Kids on the Block is a national organization that is still active today; it franchises out its puppets and its scripts to local groups all over the country. Most of its clients are service organizations, not puppetry professionals. These organizations put on plays that feature children with physical and mental disabilities—blindness, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, AIDS and HIV, among many others. Through puppetry, they help kids feel better about themselves and help other children become more accepting of them.

“When I came to Florida after I graduated,” Conner continues, “I decided to do Kids on the Block here in Central Florida. I was twenty-two when I started the company, and had I known how hard it was going to be, I’m not sure I would have been brave enough to do it. It was something I knew how to do, but it was as much a financial decision as anything else. I called Michael Prazniak, who had been my puppeteer partner in Ohio. He was waiting tables—which is what you do when you’re an actor in Ohio. He came to Florida and worked with me. The name MicheLee is a combination of our two middle names.”

The Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System (FDLRS) was already using Kids on the Block to teach children with disabilities, but did so only sporadically and with regular teaching staff as puppeteers. Conner started training teachers for FDLRS to improve their puppet manipulation skills, then began making the rounds of the various elementary schools in the district herself, performing daily. In exchange, FDLRS promoted MicheLee Puppets in its newsletter. Conner then struck a deal with Florida Hospital in Orlando that allowed her to borrow its set of Kids on the Block puppets in trade for a commitment to visit the children’s ward and perform once a month.

For Conner, it was a transformational experience. “You know, as a theater student I was all about the curtain call, and how much fun it was,” she recalls. “But as a puppeteer, for the first time I realized that theater could be used to make a difference in someone’s life. I saw how it touched the lives of kids and made a difference. It’s what MicheLee Puppets can do. It’s what I can do.”

Prazniak worked with Conner for about a year, and then left to pursue other interests. “Michael had to earn a living, but I just kept going,” Conner says. For her, “going” has meant a twenty-four-year history of developing and performing a series of highly acclaimed puppet plays for children of all ages. In 2003 MicheLee Puppets won the Marjorie Batchelder McPharlin Award, the puppetry

equivalent of the Academy Award. For MicheLee, this puppet Oscar constitutes a nationwide honor from its peers, the Puppeteers of America, and was given in recognition of MicheLee Puppets' "outstanding contributions in the field of puppetry in education and therapy." Today, the troupe is a known and trusted brand name throughout the state of Florida. It was recently honored as the 2008 Walt Disney World Champions for Children by the Association of Fundraising Professionals of Central Florida.

Both the scope and the content of the plays are carefully geared to the age of the audience. When MicheLee goes to high schools, it offers *Every 90 Seconds*, which is not a puppet show but rather a tense drama with masks, dramatic lighting and role-playing. Commissioned by the Victim Service Center of Orange County, the subject matter is very mature indeed, dealing with rape and sexual assault, and how victims can come forward and get the help they need.

"*Every 90 Seconds* often makes students uncomfortable," Conner admits. "But it's also making an impact. We're teaching teenagers about power and control and relationships, and that sexual assault is not about sex, it's about power. I direct the show. I helped write the show and I sit in the audience and cry almost every time I see it. You know there are real kids that are going through what the actors are portraying onstage."

The show has empowered any number of victims to come forward. "I remember one performance at a facility for children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse," Conner says. "Many of the girls in the audience were holding each other and crying throughout. Toward the end, one girl got up and left, and I worried that the performance had been just too intense for her. After the show, however, a case manager came over to talk to me. She told me that the girl had come over to her and said, 'O.K., I'm ready.' It was a significant step for her—she and her younger sister had been raped by their biological father over a long period of time, but she was having trouble with the idea of pressing charges against him. Seeing *Every 90 Seconds* gave her the courage to face her father in court."

The majority of MicheLee performances, however, are for elementary schoolchildren. Grades K through 5 may see *Rescuing Ruby Reef*, an underwater musical about a coral reef threatened by pollution. Youngest children (pre-K through second grade) may see *SomeBunny Special*, about self-acceptance and diversity, or *A Good Day for Pancake*, about bullying. There is also a show about bullying for older elementary school children (grades 3 through 5), but the approach is entirely different. Their program is called *BSI—Bully Scene Investigators*.

Without question, however, the star of the MicheLee repertoire is *EXTREME Health Challenge*, an off-the-wall whizbang audience participation game show about nutrition and fitness for grades K through 5. Although initially developed in 2003, it has been refined, revved up and widely performed across Florida with the assistance and support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

**Childhood Obesity—
A Burgeoning Problem**

Since 1980 the United States has grown fatter at every level of society, across all age groups, geographic regions, and income levels. As of 2008 more than a fifth of all adults were obese in every state except Colorado. By comparison, in 1991, just seventeen years earlier, no state whatsoever had an obesity rate exceeding 20 percent.²

Unfortunately, children have been in the vanguard of this alarming trend. Over the past three decades, rates of childhood obesity have risen dramatically, more than doubling among very young children ages 2 to 5 and elementary schoolchildren ages 6 to 11 and more than tripling among adolescents between twelve and nineteen. Clearly, we are in the midst of a nationwide obesity epidemic.³

In a culture obsessed with thinness, many overweight children are mocked and taunted by their peers, and the emotional scars from this thoughtless cruelty can last well into adulthood. The health problems engendered by obesity, however, go far beyond depression and other personal self-esteem issues. Obese children are vulnerable to a host of what had formerly been considered adult health problems, including heart disease, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and type 2 diabetes. “America’s future depends on the health of our country,” says Jeff Levi, executive director of the Trust for America’s Health. “The obesity epidemic is lowering our productivity and dramatically increasing our health care costs. Our analysis shows that we’re not treating the obesity epidemic with the urgency it deserves.”⁴

Perhaps because of Florida’s prominence as a retirement state, the obesity-related health issues of its children have not been allocated either the medical or the financial attention commensurate with their gravity. Although it ranks thirty-eighth out of fifty states in obesity rates among adults (23.3 percent), Florida has a considerably more serious childhood obesity problem, ranking twenty-first in the nation in obesity among children ages 10 through 17 (14.4 percent).⁵ This statistic is even more significant because Florida ranks second only to Texas in the percentage of children who are not covered by health insurance (19.2 percent),⁶ and fourth and third in the country in shortages of primary care and mental health care professionals, respectively. In other words, despite the fact that obesity is a significant children’s health issue in Florida, neither the public nor the private sector appears to be devoting sufficient resources to begin tackling the problem.

Although poor nutritional choices have garnered most of the attention for their contribution to childhood obesity, lack of physical activity is equally to blame. Couch potato syndrome has hit Florida just as it has the rest of the nation. School-age children are especially vulnerable. As of 2005 more than 60 percent of Florida’s high school students and more than 31 percent of the state’s middle school students did not participate in any physical education at school. That same year, just under half (49.5 percent) of all middle school students watched television for three or more hours a day, and a fifth (20.5 percent) used the computer for fun for three or more hours. An additional 17.1 percent reported playing video games for three or more hours.⁷

School is the natural point of intervention to deal with both the nutritional and the inactivity components of the problem. “To halt the epidemic of childhood obesity, we don’t need a tipping point,” said Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

“We need a pivot point, and school is it. School is where our children spend their days and where they learn habits that stay with them for life.”⁸

Schools, however, have been slow to improve the nutritional value of the meals they serve, and the federal government has been less than helpful. Under federal guidelines, jelly beans and popsicles have been banned because they have “minimal nutritional value.” Snickers and Dove bars are permitted, according to Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, because they supposedly contain some nutrients.⁹

The State School Foods Report Card, issued in 2007 by the Center for Science in the Public Interest, gave Florida a B-minus overall.¹⁰ The 2008 spike in food and gas prices and the 2009 recession have left school districts even more challenged in their ability to provide healthy meals. Broward County Public Schools, the district which encompasses Fort Lauderdale, serves 44,000 breakfasts and 138,000 lunches daily. In 2008 its cost to provide milk to schoolchildren soared by nearly 42 percent over the prior year. Caught between unwavering nutritional requirements and a federal mandate requiring school food programs to be self-sufficient, the district was forced to consider raising lunch prices and cutting costs to make ends meet. Among other measures the district chose to take was the substitution of white bread for whole wheat.¹¹

This is the situation facing schools throughout the state, and throughout the country. The Miami journalist Lee Klein explains, “Public school food deteriorated during the decades of budgetary cost-cutting that began with the USDA’s redefining ketchup as a vegetable to help the Reagan administration pare \$1.5 billion from the national lunch program. The federal government purchases more than \$800 million worth of farm surplus products each year and turns them over to the school lunch program. The USDA, which administers the system, considers this a win-win situation: Schools receive free ingredients, while farmers are guaranteed a steady income. Trouble is, most of the commodities provided have been bottom-of-the-barrel meat and dairy products laden with saturated fat and cholesterol. On the plus side, any kids who later in life end up in a penitentiary will probably find the cuisine behind bars comforting; the USDA sends prisons the same foods it delivers to schools.”¹²

A Connection Is Made

Although combating childhood obesity through a puppet show may seem like an unusual approach, it clearly had the potential to accomplish important objectives that were not being addressed at the governmental level. The connection between MicheLee Puppets and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation was made through a conference in Orlando on curbing youth violence. “Ann Manley from the Dr. P. Phillips Foundation was hosting and organizing part of this meeting, and a reception was planned at the Victim Service Center,” Conner recalls. “She invited MicheLee Puppets to perform part of our youth violence show *Choices* at the reception.¹³ Patty DeYoung from the Darden Restaurants Foundation was also at the meeting, and introduced me to Jane Lowe from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. When I told Jane about our healthy lifestyles show, she invited me to submit a proposal through the Foundation’s Local Initiative Funding Partners program. That proposal led to a \$50,000 planning grant in 2004–2005.

An Unconventional Grantee

One purpose of the planning grant was to hone and fine-tune the presentation of the existing healthy lifestyles show, which originally had been entitled *Extreme Game Show*. MicheLee Puppets consulted with nutritionists, pediatricians and other specialists to sharpen the curriculum content. After its makeover, the show was renamed *EXTREME Health Challenge*. The initial planning grant also provided for the development of classroom teacher lesson plans focused specifically on nutrition and exercise. These guides are now pegged to specific sections of Florida's Sunshine State Standards in subjects ranging from science and math to language arts, and give teachers a strong means of reinforcing the educational message of the puppet show. Matches for the planning grant were provided by the Edyth Bush Charitable Foundation, the Chatlos Foundation, Florida Hospital, SunTrust Banks, the Winter Park Health Foundation, the Community Foundation of Central Florida, the Darden Restaurants Foundation, and the Martin Anderson-Gracia Andersen Foundation.

Perhaps even more important, the planning grant also allowed MicheLee Puppets to take stock of itself from top to bottom, examining goals, structure, process, and resources. It enabled MicheLee to step up to become a more professional organization, and to institute methods and procedures by which it could support and sustain growth over the long term. A business/strategic plan, marketing and communications plans, and a long-range fundraising plan were all completed under the planning grant.

It was a giant leap forward for a small band of puppeteers. The total staff of MicheLee Puppets is just fourteen, including puppeteers, technicians and office personnel. Only seven of the fourteen are full time. Everyone on staff multitasks. Denise Lucich started as a puppeteer and is now the communications manager. "I'm also IT tech, coordinator for the move into our new building, and fashion design and coordination," she says with a laugh.

"When we first met Tracey Conner, MicheLee Puppets was at a critical juncture," says Pauline Seitz, who was at the time the director of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Local Initiative Funding Partners program (and is now director of a successor program called the Local Funding Partnerships program). "MicheLee Puppets was a small community organization that was well-respected and functioning well. When we made our initial site visit, we were impressed by Tracey's work, but at that point in 2004, the weight of a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant would have been far too much for her organization to bear. There was a lot of strategic planning work that they had to do to be ready, in terms both of developing their board and of business planning. She had to make some very deliberate decisions about what she wanted the future to look like. Since that time they have used every bit of support and advice that comes with a large organization like Robert Wood Johnson, and they have stayed closely connected to their local funders."

The philanthropic environment in Central Florida has greatly facilitated this connection. "Central Florida has for a long time been a place where people want to give back," says Ann Manley of the Dr. Phillips Foundation. "All of the organized philanthropies know about each other and know what the others like to do and not do, and we work together. With MicheLee Puppets, we have funded specific programs, specific scripts. We always get wonderful feedback from Tracey about how many performances they gave and how many children attended. She stays in touch."

Under the grant, MicheLee Puppets reached out far beyond its traditional base in Central Florida, partnering with other organizations across the state that are active in fighting childhood obesity. Once the revisions for *EXTREME Health Challenge* had been completed, MicheLee Puppets worked with its statewide partners to roll out the new and improved program in twenty-six schools. *EXTREME Health Challenge* premiered as a pilot program in the spring of 2005; responses and comments from teachers and audiences who previewed the show helped further refine it thereafter.

Florida Kids Take the *EXTREME Health Challenge*

After completing the planning process, MicheLee Puppets received a \$360,000 four-year (July 2005–June 2009) implementation grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, through the Local Initiative Funding Partners program. The local funders that supported the planning grant also provided funds for the implementation grant, and MicheLee Puppets was able to bring a wide range of other funders on board. Matches from the initial partners were supplemented by grants from the Aetna Foundation, the Florida Department of Health, the Mattel Children’s Foundation, the Health Foundation of South Florida, and the Blue Foundation for a Healthy Florida, among others.

Grant monies were used to present *EXTREME Health Challenge* at elementary schools across the state. With the participation of Florida’s ten regional Area Health Education Centers (AHECs), the neediest schools and school districts were prioritized for *EXTREME Health Challenge* performances. School participation in Florida’s free and reduced-cost lunch program was used as a leading indicator. Although the intensity of the 2005 hurricane season forced the cancellation of a number of performances, by the beginning of the 2008–2009 school year, nearly 200,000 students at 413 schools in 35 of Florida’s 67 counties had seen *EXTREME Health Challenge*.

What makes *EXTREME Health Challenge* so appealing and so memorable? The show makes a conscious effort to mimic the high energy, the frenetic pace and the decibel level of video games and TV game shows—the very entertainments that keep children anchored and sedentary in their seats in the first place (and thus contribute to the problem). Although humor is ever present, the health message is equally clear.

Part *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, part *Jeopardy!*, and part *Fear Factor*, *EXTREME Health Challenge* directly involves members of the student body and offers them the chance to interact with a sextet of fuzzy, madcap puppets, including Zak the pogomaniac, Kirk the ex-video game addict, and Babe the reformed sugar junkie. These puppet characters are all noteworthy in their own way, but the one who usually makes the biggest impression is the debonair ladies’ dude and outlandish puppet-about-town Rico B. Kuhl. Rico is the bling-laden self-proclaimed—and self-absorbed—King of Reggaetón. “Calm down, ladies, calm down,” he says as he makes his entrance. “There is plenty of Rico to go ‘round.” He then presents one of the hosts of the show with an unsolicited autographed head shot, “because I am so bee-yoo-teeful ... Let’s get on with this so my fans can adore me.”

With his handsome lavender movie star visage, his suave Latin lover accent, and his perfectly coiffed shiny black hair, the ever-so-hip Rico is a walking advertisement for the health benefits of hydration. In addition to featuring him in *EXTREME Health Challenge*, MicheLee Puppets has also made him the

star of his own music video called *I Drinky Water*. After he arrives on the scene in a cherry red classic convertible, an adoring chorus of girl groupies asks Rico “How did you get so cute?” He delivers his response in a Latino hip-hop rap style whose cadence is contagious:

My eyes so bright
 My hair so shiny
 My skin so soft
 Just like a baby’s hiney.
 I take a little swig
 Everywhere I go
 They don’t-a give me soda
 ‘Cause all the girlies know
 I drinky water
 I drinky water
 I drinky water
 Drinky drinky drinky drinky water...

Along with posters and other promotional materials, *I Drinky Water* is distributed to schools to ramp up student enthusiasm for upcoming *EXTREME Health Challenge* performances. In addition to being aired regularly by the Florida Department of Education on the Florida Knowledge Network, the video also plays on YouTube.¹⁴ Another promo music video features a tub-thumping, knee-slapping, Nashville-tinged ditty whose anti-preservatives message is trumpeted in its title: *If You Can’t Read It, Don’t Eat It*.

The need to drink enough water is just one topic covered in the half-hour *EXTREME Health Challenge* show. Others include the value of getting enough daily exercise—and the many different kinds of activities kids can choose from, how to make smart choices in packing a school lunch, the importance of eating lots of fresh fruits and vegetables rather than packaged foods, and how to read the nutrition label on a cereal box and what to look for: more whole grains, fiber, and vitamins, less sugar.

Even during *EXTREME Health Challenge*, however, there are opportunities to reinforce the self-esteem of children with mental and physical disabilities. At one school, a child named Blake was chosen from the audience to compete in the “Super Label Challenge” portion of *EXTREME Health Challenge*. In this segment, two students race on one foot to pluck phrases such as “Total Fat” or “Vitamins” from a giant nutrition label. Blake was one of those chosen, but he was different from his classmates. Blake had cerebral palsy; his movements were jerky and unsure. He could not run, or even walk very fast, and as a result, at recess no one would pick him for their teams—at least not until they saw him hopping on one foot in the challenge. His successful participation helped others in his class see him in a new light.

Part of the impact of MicheLee Puppets is that its performances are indeed theater. “We are artists,” Conner declares. “We provide exceptional quality theater, especially for elementary school kids who don’t always have the opportunity to see theater. We deal with many different topics, but at the core is the issue of respect for self and for others, and the need to take personal responsibility and make positive choices in your own life.”

Measuring Results

EXTREME Health Challenge is undeniably entertaining, but how can anyone be sure that the message is getting through? The development of evaluation tools that would deliver a set of specific measurable outcomes was a key component of the planning grant. MicheLee Puppets hired professional consultants to design and test its evaluation technique. The result was two separate pre- and post-tests, one for kindergarten through second grade, and another for grades 3 through 5. These tests confirmed that children understood the message of *EXTREME Health Challenge*. After the first year of the program, children who had seen the show were able to answer at least 85 percent of the post-performance test questions correctly. During the second year, a revision to the post-test was added to measure intent to change and improve behavior with regard to diet and exercise. In the aftermath, test results indicated that at least 88 percent of children were motivated to improve.

MicheLee Puppets also videotaped several of its performances, recording not the actors and puppets onstage but the students in the audience. Carefully viewing the videos, staffers counted the number of times students looked away from the action for five seconds or more. Each diversion of five seconds was considered a loss of attention. They found that attention levels ranged from 98 to 100 percent. Simply put, the kids were glued to the stage.

“We started working with MicheLee Puppets years ago,” says Patty DeYoung, foundation administrator for the Darden Restaurants Foundation, the nominating partner for the initial Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant. “It’s not until you go out and watch the awe on the children’s faces and watch the magic that happens that you really understand the impact of what they’re doing.” “MicheLee Puppets is reaching kids with a very important message about health and physical fitness,” adds Susan Black of Florida Hospital, one of MicheLee Puppets’s funding partners. “They give children the knowledge and power to take control of their own health. That’s what we love about the show.”

These observations were verified by an evaluation of the first year’s activities conducted by Valerie George, Research Associate Professor in Dietetics and Nutrition, College of Health and Urban Affairs, Florida International University. Several of the conclusions of the assessment are especially noteworthy. “In the book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell defines the ‘stickiness factor’ as the specific quality that a message needs to be successful and memorable,” writes George. “Producers of *Sesame Street* built their program on the insight that if you can hold the attention of the children, you can educate them. A research team headed by Ed Palmer was able to measure the attention level of the program by individual segments. Scenes featuring the puppet characters had the stickiness factor, and were most effective in holding children’s attention. The average attention for most shows was 85 to 90 percent.”

Hitting Home

Although measurement and testing have confirmed that the students are paying attention during the show and that they can answer the questions correctly in the immediate aftermath of seeing the program, some challenge whether this knowledge translates into real and lasting behavior modification. Teachers themselves are skeptical of the long-term benefits of the program, as indicated by their comments. “I don’t think one day will change eating habits. Parents have a lot to do with it,” and “The show helps, but is not the only thing that affects their choices.”¹⁵

It does not help that at a time when schools are particularly hard-pressed financially they have turned to unusual sources of revenue to cover their costs. School vending machines filled with soft drinks and unhealthy snacks have historically been a revenue stream for schools. In the past, the Orlando area school district has sent home report cards in envelopes promoting McDonald's and offering a free Happy Meal to any student with a good report card. The practice is not unique to Orlando; other Florida districts have included coupons for pizza, free ice cream and other fast-food items. Although schools choose to interpret these promotions as business partnerships rather than advertising, that distinction may be lost on families at home. Worse, it would appear to strengthen an unfortunate connection between good grades and the reward of fast food in the minds of young children.

In this environment, what effect can one puppet show have? After children have seen *EXTREME Health Challenge*, what changes take place in how they eat or exercise once they return home? After all, even with an avowed intention to make healthy dietary choices, children are not in control of their own nutrition. And, of course, once elementary school kids get home from school, they are up against a powerful interlocking conspiracy of bad influences, some deliberate, some accidental, some merely uninformed.

Commercial television programs still insistently market unhealthy food items, including sugary cereals and heavily processed salty snacks, to young viewers. Older teens share pizza and soft drinks with their younger siblings, giving them not only bad nutrition but also providing a poor role model in the process. A time-challenged working single parent may put fat- and preservative-laced foods, such as boxed macaroni and cheese, on the table in an effort to serve dinner—any dinner—quickly. There are monitoring and supervision issues as well. Whether in an after-school program or at home, an elementary school child watching television or sitting at a computer demands far less of an adult's attention than a child outside at play. Even for grade school children who have grasped the message of *EXTREME Health Challenge* and want to exercise and eat healthily, these pressures and influences may be difficult to overcome.

Despite all this, Conner is betting on puppet power. She is confident that the kids in her audiences are carrying the message home. "We took a package to the post office, and the mail clerk saw the MicheLee Puppets return address on the label," she recalls. "'Oh my gosh!' the clerk exclaimed. 'My kids saw your show, and they have been bugging me and my husband to go for a walk after dinner.'" In a sense, children who have seen *EXTREME Health Challenge* become little lobbyists for the new message of exercise and healthy eating. "Kids know what's good," Conner says, "and they will speak up to their parents." "Part of the answer has to be to involve parents," says Kathy Harper, senior manager, public affairs at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida. "We're focused on the children, but Tracey is having an effect by reaching parents through them."

"An important part of the show is letting kids know that they have the power to make some choices by themselves," Conner insists. "They can choose to play outside rather than watch TV. They can choose an apple over potato chips. They can choose water over soda. I know because I've seen it happen; so have many members of my team." "Children leave the show cognizant that they have a choice," says the host and puppeteer Alex Lewis, who voices Rico, Zak, and Kirk. "That's our big thing—that kids have the power to decide what they're going to eat."

Every member of the troupe has heartwarming and even tear-inducing stories of individual children and their reaction to the shows. Following a performance, the actors were loading the *EXTREME Health Challenge* sets and equipment into the van when they were approached by a parent with tears in her eyes. “I just wanted to thank you,” she said. “Yesterday, my little boy was getting off the bus when the driver told him, ‘Hurry up, Fatty!’ You see, my son Chris is obese. Devastated by the words of the bus driver, he refused to eat breakfast the next morning. That afternoon, he saw *EXTREME Health Challenge*, and learned that he had the power to make good health choices. He was so happy. ‘Mom! I can eat less junk food. I can drink water instead of soda. And I can exercise every day!’”

“Chris went from feeling depressed and defeated to feeling excited and empowered to make healthy changes in his life,” Conner explains. “That’s the power of puppetry.”

Lessons Learned: Building Sustainability through Prudent Management

It is a fact of life for MicheLee that those children who could most benefit from puppet power are those who can least afford to pay. Under the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant, schools were offered *EXTREME Health Challenge* at no cost. Looking ahead to the time when the Foundation is no longer underwriting the cost of presenting the program in Florida schools, MicheLee Puppets instituted a \$300 fee for its shows. Even at that price, however, *EXTREME Health Challenge* is a bargain. For MicheLee, the average cost per school to put on the show is approximately \$2,400.

“For the first couple of years, we had a shotgun approach with *EXTREME Health Challenge*, and we just went everywhere with the show,” Conner says. “In these last months of the grant, we are focusing on areas where we can sustain the performances through other funding. We have a large potential in South Florida, and another in the Jacksonville area, where we have a partnership with the Jacksonville Children’s Commission for their after-school program. With our major national grants like the Aetna Foundation and substantial statewide grants such as the Blue Foundation, we can hit other geographic areas as well. We may not do as many counties, but we’ll still do as many schools.”

The ability to prudently manage the growth and survival of the puppet company is an enduring legacy of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant, in particular the 2004–2005 planning grant. Initially, however, that grant was something of a disappointment. “I confess that when we first found out about it, it was a bit of a jolt,” Conner says. “My initial feeling was that they were giving us money to plan to do something we were already doing all the time. I didn’t understand what more we needed to do.”

Some of MicheLee’s local funding partners were disappointed as well. “We were all set to go on the big grant when we got this letter,” says David Odahowski, president of the Edyth Bush Charitable Foundation, a major supporter of the puppet company. “At first, it was a bit of a letdown, like a consolation prize. But in the long run it was terrific. This became Tracey’s graduate course, her Ph.D. in nonprofit management, and it came from Robert Wood Johnson through the accountability that was built into the grant.”

“The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has caused us to raise the bar at every level,” agrees the MicheLee communications manager, Denise Lucich. “It has caused us to think about every facet

of what we do. We have made great improvements in how we present ourselves to the public—our press releases, our e-mails, our printed materials. And the training has been incredible. I’ve been through two different courses of communications training, and it causes you to open up to different perspectives, things you’ve never thought about. My head explodes whenever I go for training.”

“I learned that I didn’t know what I didn’t know!” Conner exclaims. “Every time we’ve gone for seminars, it’s opened up doors we might have been afraid to walk through—or doors we didn’t even know were there. We are not the same organization that we were before we got the grant. I am not the same director or the same administrator that I was before the grant. We learned the importance of marketing and communications, and now have a line item in our budget for it. As a result of working with consultants, we learned how beneficial it is to bring in outside experts to help us do the things we can’t do ourselves. We also expanded our network of funders and partner organizations, and we learned that it is O.K. to ask your funding partners for help other than dollars.”

“On the operations side, we have learned how to protect our artistic integrity while demonstrating effective business practices,” Conner says. “We have become diligent about becoming a self-sustaining organization. We know how to apply successfully for grants, we know how to approach the business community for support, and we have been successful in proving to the community just how valuable we are.”

MicheLee Puppets has carefully built an expanding web of partnerships and alliances that will sustain them after their Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant ends. “These other foundations, including Aetna and the Blue Foundation, came on as matching grants to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant,” Conner explains. “We have now established relationships with these foundations that are totally independent of Robert Wood Johnson, and those relationships are going to continue.”

“I always tell grantees that Robert Wood Johnson is just a phase they’re going through,” Pauline Seitz says. “MicheLee Puppets’ ability to forge these new relationships makes them an excellent example of how grantees should prepare to function independently after their grant period ends.”

Looking Ahead: Replicability

Somewhat notorious among her supporters and funding partners for being financially conservative, Conner admits that the nation’s economic downturn has slowed the implementation of some of the more ambitious growth and expansion plans for MicheLee Puppets. Right now, the primary focus is on staying fiscally sound, and on strengthening partnerships with foundations, public interest organizations, and other support groups. There are plans to broaden the reach of *EXTREME Health Challenge* and other MicheLee Puppets programs both within the state of Florida and into other states as well.

Because a funding partner has been secured, however, there will soon be an additional cast performing *EXTREME Health Challenge*. Partnering with Holy Cross Hospital in Fort Lauderdale, MicheLee Puppets will add another team of puppeteers based in South Florida. “This will save us thousands of dollars in hotel and per diem travel expenses,” Conner says. “We will also be performing for family groups—kids and parents together. That will be something of an experiment, to see if it makes a

difference in what happens at home after the children see the show. If it does, we may start doing that in other areas as well.”

Another growth option is to find other groups of puppeteers who will buy the rights and do the show in their area. “We’ve been exploring this possibility with a puppet group in Georgia, but we are still in the talking stage,” Conner says. “If we can do that and it goes well, we could license the show in other states as well.” Conner does have concerns about losing creative control over the show once it is out of her hands. “I worry about making sure that whoever is performing *EXTREME Health Challenge* does a good job—about making sure that they will have the same positive impact on children that I know we have.

“We see our puppets as building bridges, opening doors,” Conner says. “If you remember Jacquee the burn survivor, her story didn’t end with her second day of class in third grade. Two years later, we were once again at her school performing. She was in the school office picking up homework, because she was on her way to the hospital for yet another surgery. Someone told her that MicheLee Puppets was in the library. She went to the library and hugged the puppeteers. She knew that we had made a difference for her.”

Meanwhile, a new generation of parents, teachers, and health professionals is interacting with MicheLee Puppets at its performances—grown-ups who had seen the puppets as children. “Makes you feel old, and it makes you feel great at the same time,” Conner says. “We were doing a show for foster children and one of the case managers came up after the performance. ‘Tracey, I’m Jennifer.’ It took a minute or two, but suddenly I knew exactly who she was. We had received a letter from this little girl. ‘Dear MicheLee, I am handicapped. I can’t see well. Sometimes I wonder why God made me this way. Then I think I am special, too. I give great hugs. And I have a friend who really cares about me. And then I think I’m glad to be me. Sincerely, Jennifer.’

“Jennifer had been a chubby little girl with glasses who had a learning disability. We had done a promotional videotape of her reading her letter. ‘You know,’ she said, ‘your show was a turning point for me. I realized that I was smart, and that I could do things. And it changed the way I thought about myself.’”

Jennifer had gone on to college and become a social worker, helping other kids with problems. “These kinds of encounters are reason enough for me to keep doing this,” Conner says. “I love my job every day, but I especially love my job on the days when a teacher, parent, student, past student, or community member approaches me to let me know that the service we offer is really making a difference.”

Little Miracles

“The success of *EXTREME Health Challenge* can help sum up what MicheLee Puppets has become, how we have grown as an organization, and where we would like to go,” Conner says. “This show is another example of our direct-to-student approach for teaching important concepts through the power of puppetry. We really do get through to the kids.”

The puppets sometimes can reach children when nothing else has worked. “Several years ago, I was the puppeteer doing *SomeBunny Special*,” Denise Lucich recalls. “And I did a show for a group that included autistic children. Many of them had more than one handicap, and the sounds they were able to make were mostly grunts and groans. After the show ended, I invited the special needs teachers and students to stay, and I did a one-on-one with the children. When I brought out the bunny, the kids were grunting and groaning. Then I brought out the raccoon—more of the same. The aides had reassured me that these were really happy sounds. I brought out Howling Hound Dog, played with him, and then had him sniff the feet of the kids, and say, ‘Woof. Woof.’” There was this one little boy—when I stopped at his feet and did the woof-woof thing, he turned around and said, ‘Woof. Woof.’”

“To me it was no big deal, but then I noticed the teachers were all crying; the aides were hysterical. Someone said, ‘Oh, I wish his mother was here!’ It was the first word he’d spoken in four years. The puppets had gotten through to him. I know I could go other places and make a lot more money, but we get to see all these little miracles. I love what I do, and I love the message that we give, and I know we make a difference.”

Notes

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