

# Research hits the stage

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for Metro Toronto

Some people put on play because they have a love of theatre, others because they have a story to tell.

The participants in the new ForOpera program, designed by Ryerson University professor Donald McKay, have spent the last 10 months putting together their own play as a way to help them deal with feelings of isolation.

"It's amazing, we do these games or exercises that seem like silly games, but they reveal so much about who you are and how you relate to other people," says Laurie Hurst, who has been part of ForOpera since hearing about the program from a friend.

Designed to harness the therapeutic powers of theatre, ForOpera is a research project that studies what happens when individuals who are suffering from feelings of isolation act out stories from their personal life in a group setting.

"The important thing for us is that it's people who feel isolated. It's not me coming in as a university professor, or a social worker coming and saying you seem isolated to me," says McKay, adding the people who suffer from these feelings come from all walks of life.

ForOpera participants in Toronto are separated into two groups, one comprised of first generation Canadians, and another that is made up of new immigrants in Parkdale.

McKay is also working on forming another two groups out of Calgary, and says the variety of participants helps him make observations about the pro-



A group of participants in Prof. Donald McKay's research project act out feelings of sadness at the Gerrard Resource Centre.

ject and how it operates.

"One of the first things that I would like to see come out of the project is a sort of manual," says McKay explaining that interested parties would be able to consult the manual and forge their own programs in various communities.

The two groups in Toronto meet once a week for two hours where they share stories about their lives, relying on theatre exercises to help stimulate conversations.

"The idea is so that when it comes time to produce the show you have sort of this arsenal of stories to look back on," says Evan Tsistsias, the director and facilitator of both groups in Toronto.

In two months the Toronto groups will be performing the plays that they

have all co-written for members of their community.

As if performing in front of an audience for the first time isn't nerve-racking enough, the actors are thrown a curveball when audience members are asked to stand up and participate in the production.

By incorporating audience participation into the performance, McKay hopes to extend the benefits of sharing stories into the surrounding neighbourhood. And as far as the nerves go, McKay says he isn't worried.

"I have so much confidence in (the two groups) that I am probably not as nervous as they are.

"But then again, I don't have to go on stage."