



MELISSA BEARNS

Telling It Like It Is

The Courageous Kids Troupe on surviving death.

The casual cruelty of middle- and high-schoolers has been well documented by Hollywood. One need only read the local paper, with stories of in-school attacks and racial and gender conflict, for more proof.

It takes something profound to transform an auditorium full of sixth- and seventh-graders from tough-acting pre-teens to a large, sniffling group in need of Kleenex and a hug. But **The Courageous Kids Troupe**, a group of a dozen or so high school students, brings about that transformation on a regular basis. Because when you're in middle or high school and you imagine what it would be like to lose your brother, sister, mother, dad or another family member, it shakes up what tenuous stability you thought your world has.

As 12-year-old Malia Satison filed out of the auditorium at Briggs Middle School in Springfield after a performance in April, she stuck close by her two friends, as if there were safety in numbers. "It made me think about if me and my Mom had a fight and I tell her that I hate her," she said. "And then, what if she died and I never got to tell her I love her? And those could be my last words."

From the moment the performers walked on stage, the show packed a whollop like a punch to the gut. The four performers stood with their backs to the audience. "Turn around if your Dad died." Three turned around. "Turn around if you felt like you were going insane." One turned around. The Simon Says game continued through a series of scenarios, and each time different actors turned to face the audience. "Turn around if you learned something positive from it." The full group stood fac-

ing the auditorium. "Turn around if you think you'll ever get over it." No one moved. Using humor that at times had the entire audience roaring with laughter, the teens used skits to explore some of the ways the death of their family member has affected them. The director of the troupe, Lauren Chandler, participated last year as a performer even though she's an adult. "My Mom died when I was 12," she explained. "I came to a rehearsal and was so blown away I really wanted to be involved. And the kids said, 'Just do it. We don't care how old you are.' It was a push for me, and incredibly powerful because I remember how isolated I felt when my Mom died."

The theater troupe is the newest component of a larger organization, Courageous Kids, and is run through Sacred Heart Medical Center. Courageous Kids was founded 10 years ago by a hospice nurse after two of her children's grandparents died within a few months of each other. The organization offers weekly grief support meetings for children and teens ages 6-18 in addition to a four-day summer camp. So far this year, the troupe has given six performances. The students write their own skits based on their personal experiences, so every year, it's a different show. Most of the performers have already gone through the Courageous Kids bereavement support program and have come to a place where they're ready to share their experiences publicly. "I know I wouldn't have been able to do this earlier," said Justine Lee, a 15-year-old sophomore at South Eugene High School. "Earlier on, my Mom tried to get me to talk about it and I wouldn't."

Much of what they do on stage is improvised around an outline. "I actually planned to say more," said Hannah Chamness, 14. "But sometimes it's just too hard to say."

That's why the Courageous Kids get up in front of hundreds of students every year: To say the things we don't know how to talk about. "Unless you've had the experience, you have no idea what it's like to go back to school and walk through those doors for the first time," Chandler said. "We're breaking the taboo around grief, especially in middle and high school where people feel like they have to have a smile on their face all the time. Everybody expects you to be yourself, and that's really hard because you feel different."

You Missed Out

Written and performed by JUSTINE LEE as part of the COURAGEOUS KIDS TROUPE

You missed out on me entering the 6th grade
 You missed out on my first boyfriend
 You missed out on him and i breaking up
 You missed out on me failing math
 You missed out on me passing math
 You missed out on 160 of my soccer games
 You missed out on Bern and i getting along
 You missed out on four of my birthdays
 You missed out on movie nights
 You missed out on me rearranging my room
 You missed out on me getting my braces on
 You missed out on me getting my braces off
 You missed out on me taking swing lessons
 You missed out on graduation shopping
 You missed out on my 8th grade graduation
 You missed out on my first day of freshman year
 You missed out on my first day of sophomore year
 You missed out on all the hugs i needed
 You missed out on all the support i should have had
 Daddy, you missed out on me growing up
 But i missed out too
 And the worst thing is
 All the memories i used to have of you
 and i together are gone
 I don't remember your voice
 I don't remember your strong hands
 I don't remember your smell
 I don't remember your eyes
 I don't remember how i felt when i was with you
 I don't remember you
 When i look at a photo of you
 I don't know who you are
 And that's something i wish i had missed out on

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