

Improv-ing self-esteem

Acting classes help children with facial differences

By HEATHER ROYCE-ROLL
LIFE WRITER

Michael Williams-Stark has been a rock musician, a Second City comedian and the voice for about 50 cartoon characters.

But what he really wants is to be the full-time facilitator of Making Faces, a series of improv acting classes for children with facial differences.

For eight weeks, groups of about 10 children meet once a week to play games, learn to speak up and look others in the eye. The goal is to boost self-esteem so these children will grow up to be active members of the community, not shut-ins.

"We've recently been focusing on 9- to 13-year-olds — when kids are making their way into the world," says Williams-Stark. However, he adds the program has worked with all age groups, from preschoolers to young adults.

It is administered by AboutFace, an information and support network for people with facial differences, and their families.

Williams-Stark himself remembers being a child and having "the worst bilateral cleft lip and palate case in B.C." As a 6-year-old, before leaving the house, he'd stand before the mirror and psych himself up for the teasing and stares.

"I knew at a very early age people could be monstrous. I was very world-weary and tired," he says.

Today, his volunteer work with Making Faces makes up for the pain in his past. "Man, I'd never trade it (the facial difference) now. It feels so good to work at a job where the results are immediate and so profound. The buzz of music and acting is nothing like this."

Williams-Stark came up with the idea for Making Faces after his partner Abby Thomas suggested he join AboutFace eight years ago. With social worker Heather Beverage and AboutFace executive director Anna Pileggi, he's been helping children for three years.

"I've never had a kid not respond," he says matter-of-factly. One mother whose daughter participated in the workshops wrote on the program evaluation: "God bless you all! She talks at home now!"

Beverage says the kids feel a sense of accomplishment about acting. "It



MICHAEL SLAUGHTER/TORONTO STAR

FACING THE FUTURE: Actor and musician Michael Williams-Stark is putting his talents to work for the Making Faces project.

increases participation in other activities. We see children come in very shy, who don't volunteer and are very uncomfortable working in pairs. After eight weeks, they will volunteer to be a part of activities and work in a group."

After completing the workshops, some children begin to answer questions in class for the first time or become more social with schoolmates. Maybe it's because they've been told they've conquered the Number 1 fear of people everywhere: public speaking. Maybe it's because of the homework assignments: Make eye contact and make big noises.

"If you can't change what makes you unattractive by Hollywood standards, how do you fit in?" asks Pileggi. "Very often, the kids want to be invisible."

So Williams-Stark works with them on body language. By carrying themselves with pride, they look less like

targets. "The very act of going into the world with a facial difference is an act of courage," he says.

Organizers hope to raise \$100,000 to travel to AboutFace chapters across North America. After that, they'd like to create a video and workbook for kids who can't make it to the workshops.

The problem, however, is funding. AboutFace is non-profit and relies on foundation grants, individual donations, corporate sponsorship and special events fundraising.

With one part-time and three full-time staff members in Toronto, and more than 2,000 volunteers in North America, AboutFace also runs a school support program, and assists parents with newborns, as well as teenagers and adults who need role models.

One such role model is Paul Stanley from the rock band KISS. Stanley was born with microtia, a deformity of the

ear, and had surgery five times when he was in his 30s.

During one AboutFace event, Stanley told a group of children without facial differences to imagine their aunt sent them the coolest shirt. Pretend, he said, that they wore it outside before noticing that people were staring and snickering. The shirt they thought was so fine was not considered cool at all. While they could take off their shirts at home, kids with facial differences, he told them, couldn't take off their faces.

This is one of the ways AboutFace tries to break down barriers between those affected by facial differences and their peers. Another is to go into schools showing kids geodes. They aren't impressed by these dirty, plain rocks until the geodes are cracked open to reveal their sparkling crystal insides. AboutFace hopes the kids will learn to search within people, too.

Discrimination based on looks is "the same as racism, homophobia or sexism. You're cheating yourself out of friends," Williams-Stark points out.

Parents are also offered support and taught to take an active role with the team of health care professionals their child might have to see, such as craniofacial surgeons, dentists, neuro-radiologists and social workers.

Pileggi says many adults with facial differences live in rooming houses on social benefits, avoiding contact with the world. But she says the Making Faces grads are more likely to grow up to have careers and families of their own.

"I want to train others to be facilitators," says Williams-Stark, "but I think they should be people who have facial differences themselves."

After having surgery, he says he can "pass" as someone without a facial difference. "I just look like I got beat up," he jokes. But he brings a photo of himself from Grade 2 to show the children he understands what they are going through.

Some people have tried to make him sound like a hero or a saint, but he describes himself simply as a guy who likes "the blues, beer and staying up all night."

Right now, he hopes to "get more on-air gigs so the kids will be inspired. If a guy with a cleft lip and palate can do cartoon voices, they can do anything!"

Making Faces can be reached through AboutFace International at 123 Edward St., Suite 1002, Toronto Call (416) 597-2229. Or check the Web site www.aboutfaceinternational.org