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The challenge to the teens was clear: Become a machine, using sound and movement. The rule: Respect the ideas of others. The philosophy: You can't be wrong when you use your imagination.

In seconds, the 11 students and their eight instructors split up and began a dialogue that would propel them into action. Arms swirled, mouths moved, legs and backs locked together. One by one, four groups took center stage, transforming into a TV, a radio, a vending machine and a Zippo lighter.

Nervous giggles punctuated their improvisations and some of the teens seemed relieved when the exercise ended. But they also were pleased when their audience figured out exactly what they were trying to do.

"Great job on all you've done," Karen Piemme said, wrapping up a recent Red Ladder Theatre Company workshop at San Jose's Emma Prusch Farm Park. "More and more, you've made choices that are different than expected."

This is no conventional drama class. Piemme's compliment goes to the heart of the mission of Red Ladder, the San Jose Repertory Company's social outreach program. Participants are at-risk youth, children with autism, the homeless, senior citizens and adults in jail. Through improvisational exercises, they develop self-esteem and confidence, learn to work in groups, and make decisions and solve problems.

"The whole process is about finding those keys that really unlock the creative spirit and understand what it means to be a positive member of their

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community," said Piemme, the creator and longtime director of Red Ladder, which marked its 15th anniversary this year.

The San Jose Repertory Company asked Piemme to launch Red Ladder Theatre Company in 1992, after she had spent five years with the Living Stage Company, a troupe that served inner-city youth in Washington, D.C. Red Ladder, whose staff consists of Piemme and 15 part-time actors, initially started working with schoolchildren who didn't have access to the arts, and then added diverse populations with each season.

### **15 years and running**

In its 15 years, the nationally recognized program, believed to be the only one in the United States, has involved 16,369 participants from across Santa Clara County. The company operates on a \$170,000 annual budget.

The young actors that day in Emma Prusch Farm Park were students at the Foundry Community Day School, a 32-year-old diversion program for kids who are "starting to go the wrong direction and get caught up in the juvenile justice system," Foundry

teacher Mike Smith said. "With a little bit of extra nurturing and attention, they might not have to go that way. We could turn them around."

Foundry student C.J. Brokaw, 16, also known as the "costume king," donned a pair of clown pants, unsure of the character he would become. "When I first came here I thought it was weird," he said. "It was so ` little kid."

Then after a couple of weeks, "I saw everybody was doing it."

Jessie Noriega, 17, has been to the workshop just three times since January, but she said the experience "makes my day."

"I can be a kid" at the workshop, she said. "You have to grow up so fast. My parents split up. When I was young, I ran away. San Jose is so big you can just get lost."

Smith sees Red Ladder as an outlet for relieving tension, a means of introducing kids to theater and a way to give them a break from the daily academics.

"They can play, they can dress up and run around and be silly and no one's going to put them down," he said. "Their daily lives are so stressful. Their living situations aren't that good."

The Foundry school, a Red Ladder client for the past 10 years, usually sends 15 students to the large multi-purpose room at the park, but participation is unpredictable.

"There is a lot of turnover in the school," Piemme said. She might be told, for example, that a participant was sent to juvenile hall or has run away from a group home. "From week to week we don't really know who is going to show up."

The exercises need to be simple enough for newcomers and yet sophisticated enough to challenge the regulars. Mostly, they're designed for fun.

### **Raising the bar**

After bidding them to become machines, Piemme later challenged them to dress up and build a set from the large wooden squares, triangles, circles, rectangles and the many red ladders placed around the room. Then they would create a "silent scene."

"We want the story to be told through actions," Piemme instructed.

Within just a few minutes, a classroom emerged, with a teacher passing out tests; a family funeral had a surprise ending when the deceased rose from the coffin; a group of tourists photographed the Statue of Liberty; and there also was this:

A conservatively dressed woman sat apart from four others lined up on chairs. A woman sobbed silently, two boys sat sullen and angry and an elderly woman breathed through an oxygen mask. No one spoke, and after several minutes, the children got up and left.

It didn't take long for the other groups to figure out that the scene depicted a family therapy session, with the therapist waiting for someone to speak.

### **Challenging day**

Said Foundry student Marissa Mendoza, 16, "Mom was sad, the kids were mad and grandma couldn't breathe."

After the workshop and with the teens out of earshot, Red Ladder staff actors could unload their frustration over the day's challenges and share techniques that work.

"You have to stay more positive" to overcome "whatever force is dragging them down," said Lauren Ivie.

Added Keith Pinto, "At a critical point, you just lead by example."

"Or pair up with them so they don't feel like they're all alone out there," said Victor Ballesteros.

From Melissa Navarro: "Look at their strengths."

Victoria Ramirez understands the challenges better than anyone. Seven years ago, she was a participant through the Foundry school. The experience was so profound that she wanted to become a staff member.

"I've been there," she said she can tell the students. "This is what I have learned. How can I help you?"

As the Red Ladder celebrates its anniversary, Piemme reflects on the future. Why not take the diverse groups and put them together? For example, a Japanese senior citizens group with teens from East San Jose.

"The more I work with very diverse communities, the more I'm working to bring those populations together," she said.

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