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UNH News: UNH Students Promote Healthy Eating, One Children’s Play at a Time

DURHAM, N.H. – Students at Merrimack’s Reeds Ferry Elementary School learned about making healthy food choices and the importance of exercise during an energy-packed performance of “The Tale of Rollie Robin,” which was created and performed by University of New Hampshire theater students. There was singing, dancing, giggle-filled moments and even Angry Birds, much to the delight of the second and third-graders watching the play.

The play “The Tale of Rollie Robin,” which took place recently during a school assembly, was the fall class project for UNH’s Theatre for Young Audiences course. It was borne out of the children’s story book of the same name that is part of an obesity awareness and prevention program designed to encourage physical activity and health food choices. It tells the tale of a bird, Rollie Robin, who has trouble flying because he eats the wrong foods. Rollie learns that by eating better and exercising through play, he is healthier. The program is targeted at students in kindergarten through third grade.

“In my Methods of Teaching Theatre course, we talk about process-oriented teaching. I wanted to give my students an experiential understanding of this teaching method, and Theatre for Young Audiences was the best course for this. This offered an excellent opportunity to not only provide my students with practical experience but to also draft a piece of theater that can now be shared with more elementary schools. I hope in the future to use our script for the UNH Theatre & Dance Artsreach Tour,” said Raina Ames, associate professor of theatre and dance.

The children’s story book and awareness program was created by Bill Scott, a professor of applied business management at the Thompson School of Applied Sciences at UNH. Scott creates children’s awareness and prevention programs in his free time as a community service. Rollie Robin is the second children’s awareness program Scott has created; his first program was the Samantha Skunk Smoking Prevention Program, which he was inspired to create by his daughter who suffers from asthma.

“When I asked my grandchildren what kind of animal would be most harmed by eating the wrong food, they immediately suggested a bird. After many discussions with my grandchildren, the acronym Healthy Eating Lots of Play was developed and Rollie Robin was born. Oops. Hatched,” Scott says.

Last summer, Scott approached Ames about having “The Tale of Rollie Robin” story book adapted as a children’s play.

“Adaptations such as ‘The Tale of Rollie Robin’, are incredibly important. Reading a story is one thing, but when the story comes to life, it is something entirely different. The students are brought into Rollie’s world and that
helps them connect to the content on a deeper level,” says Briana Traynor, a senior from Rockport, Mass., who plays Rollie’s older sister Ruby Robin.

Traynor says the project of adapting Rollie Robin as a play has been an invaluable experience as she plans a career as an elementary school teacher who uses arts integration to enrich her lessons.

“This project has been a culmination project for me as a theater educator. I have loved learning all about the importance of the arts, especially theater, for kids inside and outside of the classroom. I have been able to take everything that I have learned in the theater education program so far and combine it in this project. That has been incredibly rewarding,” Traynor says.

Lauren Barton, a senior from Sanford, Fla., was involved behind the scenes with directing and blocking, writing, and overseeing the props.

“The most worthwhile part of being involved in this project has been learning how to direct with others, learning how to write a children's script, and knowing that our show could change the lives of the students who see it for the better,” Barton said.

After she graduates, Barton plans to work as a high school drama teacher and high school director. “This class has taught me how to build a show from the ground up. The experience of interpreting text, blocking, directing, and organizing all technical elements of a show has been invaluable,” she says.

Sophomore Olivia Fiore of Brightwaters, N.Y., says her experience in this class has taken her one step toward a career working for public television and creating educational television.

“Only so much is gained from just listening. When you add visuals, musical numbers, and audience participation, the message comes alive. Our society is too focused on how we look instead of our overall health. Hopefully by seeing Rollie, kids will see the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, not how beautiful you are,” Fiore says.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.