



# Cathy Plourde

## Add Verb Productions: Do-It-Yourself Change

### Part of “Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine”

Written by Ericka Blauch

The lone young woman has captured the attention of the teenagers who have come to watch her perform. They are rapt as she seamlessly transforms from Ellen, to Ellen’s mother, to Cindy, Ellen’s friend, to The Voice of Ellen’s Eating Disorder. Each of the voices tells them in a distinct way about the pain of Ellen’s struggle with anorexia. Near the end of the performance, Ellen looks out at the audience, which is clearly visible under the house lights. “What are you going to do?” she asks everyone.

In this intimate setting, the lines between imagination and reality are blurred, and that’s exactly how Cathy Plourde, the Executive Director of Add Verb Productions, wants it. In her plays, interaction between audience and actors is the norm. The proximity of the performers to the audience creates an atmosphere that captivates the teenagers and young adults to whom Add Verb’s

plays are directed. “Kids are not often savvy about theater,” Plourde says. “Performance is something new for them. Because they are in the same room with the actors, they are able to bond with the characters in the play, and the story sticks with them in a way that a film or lecture in health class is not going to.”

Plourde’s plays, including *The Thin Line*, which is about eating disorders, are intentionally unresolved, because, as she puts it, “these problems don’t just go away, so the play is not really over. It actually may have brought up something that is just beginning.” Because Add Verb’s overarching goal is to help young people not only become educated about health crises, but also to know how to respond to such situations, Plourde and her staff have developed a curriculum that communities can use to help audiences process and react to the plays.

*“If you want something, don’t wait for others to do it.”*



Add Verb Productions, which Plourde founded in 2000, provides health and wellness education through provocative theatre performances primarily targeted towards middle school, high school, and college students. Now a program of the University of New England's Westbrook College of Health Professions and a flagship program of the InterProfessional Education Collaborative, Add Verb's mission is to build stronger, healthier communities through theater education. To date, Add Verb's productions have reached over 120,000 people in 34 states and internationally.

Another Add Verb play, *You the Man*, about dating violence and sexual coercion, and *The Out and Allied Project*, about queer and questioning youth, are primarily geared towards teenagers and young adults. Another production, *Major Medical Breakthrough*, targets health care providers, such as doctors and nurses, who are often the first to notice signs of domestic abuse. The productions are made to be thought-provoking and intriguing, as well as factual and informative.

Plourde sees her plays as a means of opening dialogue and creating a "safe space" for bringing problems that are often kept secret to the attention of professionals who can help. "It's not just that you're educated about eating disorders, for instance, but you cultivate a community where it is okay to deal with things," she says. "There's a larger win in this situation for people.

"Seeing the plays can be very validating for individuals. After seeing *The Thin Line*, a ninth grade student at Berwick Academy said that she felt like she didn't have to carry the secret by herself." Another student remarked that he felt that he knew what to do to help his girlfriend, who was suffering from an eating disorder.

Guided by her belief that "If you want something, don't wait for others to do it," Plourde left her job as a high school teacher after becoming frustrated with an unresponsive administration and created

new outlets for her energy. A member collective of teachers and community members, and what is now *Mainly Girls*, she worked on a conference to address the very issues that the American Association of University Women's report on how schools shortchange girls called attention to on a national level. Plourde wrote a play to kick off the conference that eventually became *The Thin Line*, which led to more plays and then to working with actors in large-scale productions. Support from the Maine Community Fund, the Maine Women's Fund and some individual private donors helped Plourde stabilize what is now Add Verb Productions.

Though Plourde describes herself as an educator and playwright, these days, her work includes managing longitudinal studies on the programs, writing grants and grant reporting, meeting with donors, talking to funders, supporting interns, collaborating with directors and agents, and organizing contracts. Currently, she is focused on promoting the most recent play, *Major Medical Breakthrough*, and recently traveled to conferences in Houston and Toronto to stage the production. Add Verb's first book, *Out & Allied Anthology of youth writing* is due to be released this March.

Though Add Verb's productions have been met with critical acclaim and have reached many audiences, Plourde says that she is "not even close" to achieving her goals. "I want to run and hit big. I want a corporate sponsor. I want 500,000 or more people to see the plays. I'd love to write a piece on substance abuse. In some ways I feel like I've barely scratched the surface. There's so much more that's possible," she says.

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