Research Week Proposal

Title – *Every Brilliant Thing*: The Rippling Effects of Mental Illness and Suicide on the family

Program of Study – Forensic Speech

Presentation Type – Performing Arts

Mentor(s) and Mentor Email – Denise Thomas, School of Communication and Digital Content (adthomas@liberty.edu)

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Performers: Rebekah Sharpe, Evan Young, and Lily Mathes (Director: Katie Thomas)

Category – Creative and Artistic

Abstract: The play *Every Brilliant Thing* addresses the incredible impact of mental illness within families. This presentation will specifically look at how an individual’s depression and suicidal tendencies affect the ones in their innermost circle, namely friends and family. Perhaps the most significant observation is that of the depressed mother. Mothers with depression in remission showed less emotional availability to their children, which results in in psychological problems and intellectual deficits due to an inability to form healthy mother child relationships (Kluczniok et al.). Fathers could moderate these effects, but taking on the roles of both parents often brought about marital tension (Wijngaarden et al.). Offspring of those suffering from mental illness are more susceptible to taking on their parent’s psychiatric symptoms. They become overwhelmed with a variety of emotions such as fear, anger, and shame—often blaming themselves for their parent’s behaviors.

Playwrights Duncan Macmillan and Jonny Donahoe masterfully convey the ripple effect of mental illness and suicide. Despite the narrator’s desperate attempts to keep his mother alive
by writing down “every brilliant thing about the world” and reading them to her, she continues to attempt suicide (Donahoe). Audience members watch as the narrator deals with guilt and shame, as well as (his or her) own battle with depression and suicidal thoughts later on. The narrator’s mother appears emotionally distant and unavailable to her child, which later affects the way the narrator acts in his/her own romantic relationship. Eventually, the narrator seeks out group therapy, recognizing his/her need to talk about negative feelings and taking a step towards healing.

The story highlights the strain placed on the loved ones of an individual with mental illness, and it will show both sides of the story when the narrator later experiences the same feelings his/her mother dealt with. And yet, the story also brings hope by ending with a family’s road to healing after trauma.
Works Cited

