



it's showtime!



It's just before 9 a.m. at Dorothea B. Johnson Elementary School, and UNCW pre-licensure nursing students **Kali Londa '15** and **Molly Cole '15** are readying a pop-up puppet show stage.

shh! shh! shh!

Thirty-six Head Start students, kids from vulnerable populations, tiptoe into the room, pointer-fingers pressed to lips in the universal “shh” sign. The kids quietly find a seat along the descending rows of stairs, but their whispers of excitement — “There are the Puppet People!” — simply can’t be contained.

Cole and Londa, recipient of the Barnhill Contracting Scholarship for nursing, greet the audience, and then introduce today’s theme: reasons to exercise. The puppeteers ask the kids what they do for exercise.

“Dance!” cry a couple girls wiggling in the front row.

“Run around!” shouts a boy.

“I ride bikes,” says another boy. He looks up from his lap with a shy smile.

“All great ways to exercise. How about jumping jacks?” ask the puppeteers. “Should we do some jumping jacks?”

The room becomes a thunderous “Yes!” Arms flap like airplane wings, legs kick sideways, and with the slightest bit of encouragement, 10 turns into 20. The jumping jacks portion of the program is a smashing success.

The puppet show program is one of pediatric and neo-natal nurse Patricia White’s ETEAL (Experiencing Transformative Education through Applied Learning) initiatives, a series of programs designed to get students outside the classroom and into the world, where potential patients live and breathe.

“Every patient has a story,” shares White, who transitioned from the clinical setting to join UNCW’s team of lecturers in 2010.

The puppet shows are fertile ground for getting these stories.

“The kids are good at shouting out what’s on their mind,” she said with a laugh. She recalled a particularly poignant audience participation moment during presentation on Stranger Danger.

“I know what a stranger is,” yelled a child. “A stranger is someone who comes up behind you with a knife and tries to cut you.”

For White, that’s where the real education starts. The kids’ candor and unpredictable answers expose her students to real-life scenarios, where “patients” become more than medical charts, or faceless paperwork. “A patient is more than a disease,” says White. “A patient is a person.”

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The puppeteers disappear behind the black curtain; moments later, the puppets rise through the air. Today’s cast features Caucasian brother and sister puppets and an African American doctor puppet; other performances might feature a Latino police officer puppet, an Asian firefighter puppet or a Native American nurse puppet.

The kids like the dialogue, even shouting out the occasional unscripted line, but they love the physical interludes—the space between words where the puppets literally act out stage directions.

During a pantomimed walk to the store, there’s a synchronized sway over the top of the curtain. The room fills with little-kid laughter. An imaginary TV turns off and brother and sister puppets start to weed grandma’s garden, heeding a doctor puppet’s advice to “get outside.” A virtual shovel, maybe an invisible rake and a new wave of giggles trickle down the stairs.

The puppeteers are heartened. The dialogue says to run around, play kickball, walk instead of drive to the corner store — and yet, the puppets’ physical motions say it best. From the sounds of laughter, it’s clear today’s message has reached the young audience.

Immediately following each show, there’s a Q and A from the audience, and the puppeteers give the kids fun, interactive handouts. Nutrition is another popular puppet show theme, and fruits and veggies often find their way onto exercise-related worksheets.

“Lots of kids have soft drinks for breakfast,” says White. “Unfortunately, the ‘bad for you’ foods are usually cheaper.” But seeing a superhero puppet score the winning goal after eating her spinach, and then telling mom and dad about it, just might make an impact. On the back of each handout, there’s information for parents — what the puppets taught, how the kids responded and how to help kids achieve new goals.

“Draw a circle around every vegetable,” asks one worksheet.

“Which kid is exercising?” The Wii video game station doesn’t count.

White sees education as the best preventative medicine: “Just one small change a day can make a difference.” By delivering valuable information in a kid-friendly fashion, the “Puppet People” plant the seed in the hope that good health will grow from it.

by Jamie Lynn Miller ’15M