

Second Act

Stephanie Koempel left the theater to provide a compassionate ear at PSI

Thousands of people dream of the career that Stephanie Koempel had just out of college — touring the country as a professional actress in shows such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *101 Dalmations* and *The Emperor's New Clothes*. But while she loved the feeling of being on stage and touching an audience, Koempel longed to affect people's lives in a more permanent way.

"I wanted more of a connection with people, more of an opportunity to assist them with lifelong change, rather than just one evening of entertainment," she says. "Instead of helping them escape, I wanted to help them deal with life's issues."

That decision led Koempel to Kean University's counselor education program, where she earned her Masters degree in 2004. While at Kean, Koempel began looking around for internship programs. She was drawn to PSI's PRIDE Institute at Summit Oaks Hospital, which helps members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community cope with chemical dependency and mental health issues.

"The Pride Institute is important because it's a place where my clients can just be who they are," Koempel says.

Now in her third year at Pride, Koempel says her theatre training has benefited her

work as a counselor. Acting taught her how to control her emotions, helping her create what she calls her "therapeutic poker face." That's been a huge help as a counselor she says, particularly in working with the GLBT population.

"My clients often have a fear of being judged," she says. "I provide a safe and empathetic environment in which to begin the recovery process."

The Pride Institute is a 12-bed, in-patient facility for patients in crisis, and the typical stay is about two weeks. Koempel is the only counselor on staff, so her days are extremely busy, divided between group work, one-on-one therapy, assessments and administrative work. But the rewarding nature of her work makes up for any stress.

"When my clients come in, they are really in distress," she says. "It's amazing to physically see them improve and to hear them making hopeful statements about their futures."

And though Koempel may sometimes miss the thrill of performing onstage and soaking up the audience's applause, there's nothing like knowing she's influenced her

patients in such a positive way.

"I really enjoy seeing the lightbulb go on, when they embrace what you're saying," she says. "It doesn't happen with everyone, but that's always my goal — that clients leave here in a much better place than when they came in."



Stephanie Koempel

Fast Facts

Child Behavior Problems

A child's emotional and behavioral problems can persist throughout their development and lead to lifelong disability. Parents are usually the first to notice, and are crucial to alerting doctors and obtaining mental

health services for their child.

The 2003 National Health Interview Survey measured the percentage of children, 4-17, reported by a parent to have definite or severe emotional or behavioral problems. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Natl. Ctr. Of Health statistics, National Health Interview Survey

