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Last Comic Standing

Crack a Joke

By Charleen Earley

Standing In a crowd of friends, you are a hoot. You crack jokes wherever you are, even if it is in an elevator.



In a crowd of friends, you are a hoot. You crack jokes wherever you are, even if it is in an elevator. Or maybe you're not all that funny, but you give occasional talks at meetings, and you would like to spruce it up a bit with humor. Ultimately, you want to take your funniness to the next level, but you don't have Ellen Degeneres in your family tree. So how?

Okay, scratch the idea of trading your family for Ellen's. More than likely, she won't comply and her family won't give her up, what with the wealth of good humor she dishes out daily on NBC.

Next, find forums that cater to people who want to try their stuff out. Places that have open mics. Open to any level of talent. Try coffeehouses, restaurants, and comedy clubs (must be at least 18 years old), such as the Bourbon Street Comedy Club in Concord. Ask for Dave.

It is how I got my start more than eight years ago.

I always found the funny side to most things in life, going right back to mimicking my fifth grade teacher when her back was turned. Fast-forward some 30 years. After I cracked a joke over chips and salsa at a journalism party, a gal told me I could do stand-up. My immediate response was, where?

Open mics or guest sets (five-minute sets of jokes for no pay at comedy clubs before the paid comics come to stage) are the best way to see how well your jokes are received. It is one thing to be in the company of dear friends and family, quite another to be in the company of strangers doing what political comedian Will Durst of San Francisco dubs "making people laugh against their will."

You are not looking for courtesies laughs.

What you want now are sincere, heart-felt guffaws from complete strangers to chart your new work in progress.

Comedy and improv classes, coupled with finding friends interested in this arena, are yet another way to exercise your funny bone. It is what comic John DeKoven of Pleasanton did when he first got started almost five years ago. "I took a variety of different comedy classes from different places. I think this fast-tracked me a bit. The advantage was that I was with other people in the same situation as me and we could learn and practice together," he says. DeKoven now produces more than 60 comedy shows a year, including first and third Wednesdays at Mr. Pickwick's British Pub in Concord. He also offers comedy workshops in



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Comic Johnny Steele, Pittsburg's favorite funny guy, who plans to begin humor writing classes in his home for groups of six for "very little dough, certainly under 20 clams, for a two-hour session," points out that humor in a speech is not only a good idea, it is vital. "One big benefit of using humor in a speech, or article or presentation, is that you'll get hired. I heard a silly line once: 'Q: Do I have to use humor in my speech? A: Only if you want to get paid!' Dave Barry's pieces aren't really very illuminating, but the humor makes them valuable. Humor has other uses in a speech as well, like setting the tone or revealing something about the speaker."

"Get as much stage time as possible," advises Bay Area comedienne Arlene Chew. She recalls her first stand-up set 14 years ago at a club called Fubars in Martinez, where she belted out five minutes of raw material to construction workers slinging back beers. "As it turns out, I did all right!"

GETTING INTO IMPROV

Bourbon Street Comedy Club
2765 Clayton Road, Concord
925.969.9802, www.bourbonstcomedy.com

John DeKoven, 925.264.4413
www.laughalotproductions.com

Mr. Pickwick's British Pub (some Wednesday nights)
4622 Clayton Road, Concord
925.459.0574, www.mrpickwickspub.com

Johnny Steele
www.Johnnysteele.com

Spuds (Friday nights)
3290 Adeline Ave., Berkeley
510.597.0795, www.spudstravels.com

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