

COMEDY as THERAPY



GINA HALFERTY — Staff photos

JOHN DeKOVEN, a Pleasanton resident, emcees a comedy show at Main Street Brewery, organized by his company, Laugh-A-Lot Productions.

Local man makes clubs Laugh-A-Lot

■ For John DeKoven, comedy is a way of life — and a way to deal with life

By **Brian Foley**
STAFF WRITER

PLEASANTON — John DeKoven finds comedy in every situation, no matter how difficult.

Take his divorce for example, a cumbersome experience that lasted longer than the marriage itself. To cope with the emotional roller-coaster, he established

www.helpjohngetdivorced.com.

"It got 14,000 hits its first week," he said.

Upon hearing about it, his irate better-half demanded the Web site be dismantled as part of the divorce settlement. He reluctantly obliged.

"In court they read the settlement out loud," he said. "When they mentioned that part of the settlement, it was hilarious. Everyone in the courtroom was laughing."

DeKoven, 40, heads Laugh-A-Lot Productions, which organ-

izes stand-up comedy shows for local venues. He started it more than a year ago, initially as a side job.

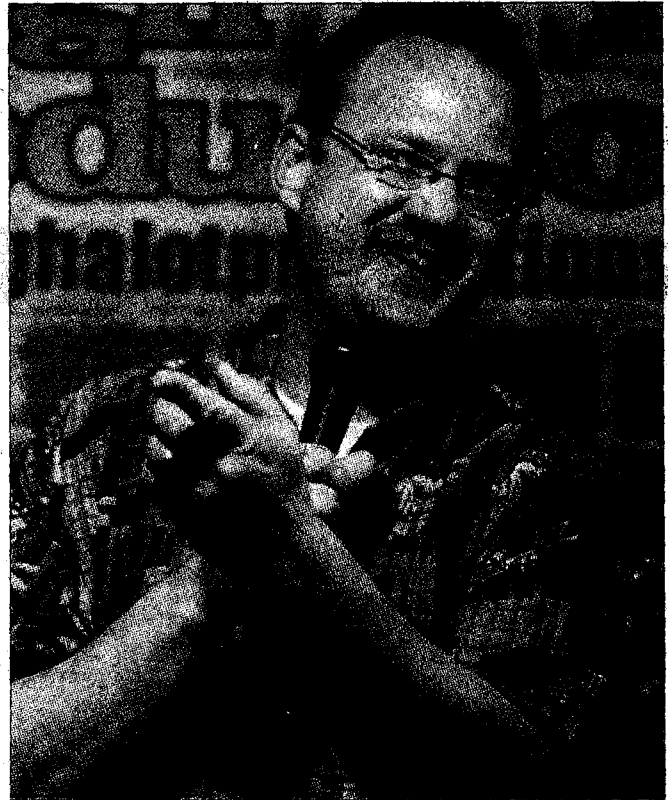
For starters, DeKoven partnered with Main Street Brewery in Pleasanton, which agreed to hold one show a month. He would round up about five Bay Area comics for each show. Soon shows began to take off, and DeKoven quit his day job in mortgage financing to focus his acumen for business into his newly found nocturnal world.

"What I really enjoy is that I get to combine my entrepreneurial business skills with something I like to do, like comedy," said DeKoven, a four-year Pleasanton resident. "Comedy was more of an outlet, like a stress relief. During the divorce, it was better than going to therapy."

For DeKoven, laughter is an element he seeks in every scenario. He recalled when his father died of cancer 10 years ago.

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INSIDE: For more entertainment news, see **Valley 6**



JERRY and Debbie Jimenez of Pleasanton enjoy the comedy show at Main Street Brewery, organized by John DeKoven of Laugh-A-Lot Productions. **Jim Summers** (above), a comedian from Salinas, performs for a crowd.



Man starts comedy production company

► **COMEDY**, from Valley 1

While he and his family grieved, they also shared chuckles while sorting funeral arrangements.

"Picking out a coffin was like going to a used car lot," DeKoven said. "We were laughing — well, not laughing. But it was a response to deflect the stress. We'd look at each other and say, 'What the hell would Dad care about having a pillow?'"

Unlike most modern-day comedians, he says he didn't grow up idolizing those in stand-up, like Richard Pryor, George Carlin or Steve Martin.

"I like those guys, but my favorite comedy was the sitcom variety," DeKoven said. "I loved David Letterman and Johnny Carson. I loved 'Taxi' and 'Cheers,' but I never had a favorite comedian. I'm not really a student of stand-up."

When DeKoven first began Laugh-A-Lot, he did what any beginning business owner would do. He adopted a logo, marketed the company and collected e-mail addresses. He established a networking relationship with Bay Area comedians. And he began pitching his shows to local restaurants, where, according to DeKoven, they are always looking to attract a different crowd.

Matt Billings, owner of Main Street Brewery, expanded shows to twice a month because of popular demand.

"They come in early, dine, have a couple of beers and then they get to laugh," Billings said. "You get one or two comedians who are just cutting their teeth. But when you get the top two comedians toward the end, they are frickin' hilarious. People are wiping their eyes because they are laughing so hard."

DeKoven has since expanded operations beyond restaurants and focused on corporate gatherings and fundraisers for non-profits. Cheri Clasen, banquet manager at Stacey's At Waterford in Dublin, was skeptical about hosting a show at first. But a Saturday night show resulted in much more business than a typical weekend evening.

"It seemed that no matter what the menu was, it was successful," she said. "The whole restaurant was packed. The crowd wasn't rowdy but it was a fun atmosphere. . . . I remember just dying of laughter."

DeKoven tries to mix up shows with comedians of diverse backgrounds. Content tends to get edgy and sometimes graphic. Sex talk and cursing aren't overwhelming, but they happen. Shows don't have age limits, but DeKoven encourages a crowd of

16 years and older.

"Usually by 16, they've heard it all," he said.

DeKoven usually emcees his shows and throws in his own jokes before the featured comedians go on stage. Many of his jokes are about mid-life dating. One joke he offers is designed to work the crowd:

"My girlfriend asked me to watch her daughter last week," he says. "At first I was pretty uncomfortable. But I didn't really know how fun it could be to hang out with a 14-year old virgin."

That's when the crowd groans.

"Listen, I'm only joking," he says. "You know this stuff isn't true. You know there's no such thing as a 14-year old virgin."

DeKoven now has a girlfriend who doesn't mind being the topic of his act. She even offers suggestions for his routine. But he said, the source of his comedic drive can be traced to his ex-wife and the divorce, a time when his Web site offered a respite.

"In a sense, I have her to thank," he said.

For more information on show times and locations, visit www.laughalotproduction.com.

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Tri-Valley Herald June 10, 2006

Comedy sketch was offensive

I thought long and hard before sitting down to write this letter. Would it matter? Would anyone there understand? Obviously the answer was yes to both questions since you are reading this.

I read the article about comedy as therapy, about John DeKoven, in Friday's Herald. It was rather fun and interesting until I read the reference to John's personal brand of comedy. The reference to his bit about spending time with a 14-year-old virgin, and the follow up of there's no such thing as a 14-year-old virgin was disgusting to me.

It might be slightly humorous in a nightclub scene for a 40-year-old man to make lewd innuendos about a 14-year-old girl. But I would think that he would have something more humorous and more fitting for a family newspaper article. For a journalist to include it in his article and for an editor to not see how it

could be an offensive subject in this day and age is mind boggling.

You may consider this letter an over-reaction, but ask a few people who have had to deal with the results of child molestation. See if they don't agree that you kind of messed up on that article. You are the "professionals" and it's incumbent on you to ensure you don't cross some lines.

The article may be intended as fluffy filler but it was more disturbing to me than any article written about Iraq or the Middle East.

James Cline
Livermore