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Boonton students hear about 'natural highs'

Speaker emphasizes how important it is to be substance-free

BY MEGHAN VAN DYK
 DAILY RECORD

Saturday, March 24, 2007

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BOONTON -- What do Shrek, Napoleon Dynamite, Eminem and Spider-Man all have in common? Most movie buffs might struggle for a solution, but motivational speaker Matt Bellace would say the answer is the motivation the lead characters needed to accomplish their goals.

"And that has made all the difference," he told 620

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BOB KARP / DAILY RECORD
 Matt Bellace speaks to Boonton High School students at an assembly about being anti-drug and pro-motivation. Bellace emphasized the importance of natural highs to students and shared some of his own experiences with them.

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Boonton High School students on Friday.

Bellace, 33, was at the school to speak about "natural highs" and drug and alcohol prevention. The Montclair High School graduate shared personal stories to illustrate the benefits of living a substance-free life. For most students, the assembly was more than just a lecture -- it was also a stand-up comedy routine.

He created an acronym -- LEAD -- as a tool to stay healthy:

- Lean on positive people for support;
- Explore your motivation to be healthy;
- Achieve natural highs; and
- Don't be afraid to take a stand

Duct tape inspired one of Bellace's favorite "natural high" memories from college. He and a friend at Bucknell University duct-taped another friend to a wall in the student center when he was an undergrad there. Bellace videotaped people's reactions.

"One kid fell to the ground, as if he was praying to her. He didn't know what to do," Bellace said. "You could see the kids from places like New York City just pass by pretending like they didn't notice. I swear, New Yorkers would just keep walking if they saw a head roll down the street."

"Now that was a natural high. I still smile when I think about it."

Freshman Kevin Wetzel thought Bellace's message is important for all high school students.

"I think he really connected to a lot of the students today," Kevin said. "It really got me thinking about the friends I have here, one in particular."

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BOB KARP / DAILY RECORD

Bellace said that when he was being interviewed for a doctoral program, the interviewer skipped over his GPA and experience and asked him right away about his experience starting the substance-free group.

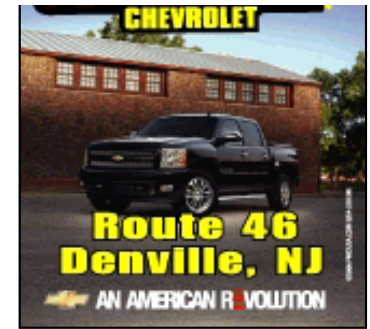
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Bellace spoke about his experience starting a substance-free group to illustrate how taking a stand pays off in the long run. After the club was a success --attracting crowds of students to bowl, skate or hear comedians on the weekends -- the trustee asked whether they would like to move into a newly renovated, former frat house. His roommate told him it would be "social suicide," but he followed through anyway.

"No great leader takes a stand and doesn't experience resistance," Bellace said. "Two months later, I hear a noise that gets closer and closer to the house. I look outside and see 40 naked guys running toward me -- the track team did this every year."

"If you play track, don't ever run naked. Anyway, the door opened and I grabbed a guy in a headlock and did a hip toss, and the guy behind him fell. A moment of homophobia hit the athletes and they were outta there."

But the club landed him admission at the one doctoral program that offered him an interview, he said.

"The interviewer skipped right over my GPA, my experience and asked me if it was difficult to start the club," Bellace said. "I told him about the naked guys."

Bellace was animated and solicited the help of volunteers to keep the audience's energy level high. His stories and the interactive routines drew big laughs from both students and teachers.

Sophomore Nomier Akhtar called it "the best assembly ever."

"He talked about a lot of real issues and made me think twice about doing things on the weekend just because other people are doing it," senior Jaqueline O'Lear said.

Boonton Middle School boasts a substance-free group called Students for Change, but the high school doesn't have one. Sophomore Shane Dencker thinks the club would go over well at Boonton High School.

"A good number of students here drink or do drugs, but most don't," Shane said. "I think a lot of people would join."

Vice principal Bob Sutter said students already know how to have fun together. They just need positive role models.

"I'm not that far removed, so I remember what it was like in high school or college," Sutter said. "There are a lot of peer pressures. I think its great that there is a leader showing which way is the right way, and that's really what this school is all about."

Bellace has a Ph.D. in psychology from Drexel University. He became a speaker to marry his love of comedy and substance-free living.

He performed 140 times in 2006 and is on track to nearly double that number this year, he said. He also puts on workshops for adults and senior citizens and performs stand-up at comedy clubs.

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"Taking a stand in this environment is not easy, and you don't always feel the benefits right away," Bellace said. "Sometimes you only get one chance and you better hope that you're ready when you get it."

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