

Speaker urges Conestoga Valley students to seek natural highs

By DONNA WALKER

Natural highs surpass those from alcohol or drugs 100 percent of the time and no one explains why better than Matt Bellace, a clinical psychologist and comedian who spoke to Conestoga Valley High School students Thursday, May 9.

When CVHS students attend prom Saturday, the message from Bellace may stay with them. At least that's the hope of Students Against Destructive Decisions, which brought Bellace in to speak because they want high schoolers to make good decisions, especially when they celebrate upcoming milestones.

"There's a lot of opportunity for risky decisions especially around prom and graduation. Now they have a new (drivers') license and a new found independence," said Nancy Lopez, SADD advisor and district school nurse coordinator. "Our goal is to arm them with strategies to help them make good decisions."



Matt Bellace interviews students during program

Making good decisions means not doing drugs or drinking alcohol, and Bellace knows what that means because when he was young, he didn't. Students listened when he spoke, mostly because he had them laughing so hard they didn't want to miss a word.

"I never say, 'Don't do drugs,' because I know that won't stop young people from doing drugs. It will, however, stop them from listening to me," Bellace said in his book "A Better High: Laugh, Help, Run, Love ... and Other Ways to Get Naturally High." Instead he interacts with students and makes them laugh.

Student Zayda Shavtakova went onstage with three others to participate in an activity that got everyone laughing. While volunteers were in the hallway, Bellace told the audience to think about kissing when he asked participants questions about their personal highs. They admitted details such as liking to do it in the woods or starting at 13 years old before revealing their natural highs: running, helping others and helping a spouse kick cancer.

"I liked that he asked us about natural highs and showed we can (use) sports as natural highs. I never supported drugs, etc., and it makes me happy he helps people see that," Shavtakova said.

Bellace's message is that students can have fun and be substance free. With a doctorate in clinical neuropsychology from Drexel University, he understands the effects of chemicals on the brain and behavior. Natural highs, he said, emit the same feelings as those that come from drugs.

Laughing, for example, causes the brain to emit dopamine, the same chemical cocaine produces, resulting in a sense of euphoria. Running emits opiates as well, the same as those produced by using marijuana, heroin or alcohol that result in a sense of calm and power.

Specifically, running activates anandamide to produce the runner's high: "It has the same effect as ADHD medication and it looks exactly like THC," Bellace said.

The difference is the effect on memory. He said smoking five or more joints a week shrinks the brain's hippocampus, decreasing its memory function. Conversely, exercise increases the hippocampus and improves memory.

"If you choose natural highs as part of a balanced lifestyle, it will benefit your brain's ability to develop to its full potential," Bellace said.

Ryan Brooks, president of SADD, said he was pleased with students' reaction to the presentation, saying the group's efforts to promote healthy choices with activities throughout the year are getting results.

"I see a lot more involvement with students this year," Brooks said. "We're strong on students wanting to participate in SADD."

Read more: http://lancasteronline.com/article/local/848046_Speaker-urges-Conestoga-Valley-students-to-seek-natural-highs.html#ixzz2T8FvTnAj