



Finding That Natural High

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He's a psychologist, comedian, and dynamic public speaker.

He can regale an audience with stories of his youth in Montclair, New Jersey, his days at Bucknell University, his adventures with his wife Dara and their children Roy (almost four) and Sidney (one), and his affinity for surfing and the culinary arts.

Mainly, though, Matt Bellace has a message, and it's intended to change perspectives – or, at best, reinforce values – of students and adults at venues such as Collegiate, where he made a stop today.

Through the humor generated by his well-honed stand-up routine, Bellace talks passionately about generating natural highs and condenses his thoughts with the acronym LEAD.

Lean on others for positive support.

Express yourself in a healthy way.

Achieve natural highs through mindful activities.

Don't be afraid to take a stand.

"The people you surround yourself with predict a lot about your behavior," he said.

"Choose your friends wisely. If they're negative influences, you're more likely to pursue those influences whether it's bullying or getting involved with alcohol or drugs.

“If you surround yourself with positive people who are pursuing goals and making healthy choices both physically and emotionally, you’re more apt to go in that direction.”

In his fast-paced presentation and his book *A Better High*, Bellace cites his older brother, who often found himself seeking negative attention.

“And his friends reinforced that,” he continued. “I ended up with a different group that took me in a more positive direction.”

So how, when you’re a kid, do you work through peer pressure that could take you down the wrong path? I asked him afterwards.

“I had the blessing, actually, of having my brother struggle with his behavior,” he responded. “Anything he was doing, I wanted to do the opposite. That helped me. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have known.

“When I ran into friends who were making healthier choices, it felt right to me.

“Certainly, my mother (Louise, the vice-principal at his high school) had a huge influence because I didn’t want to deal with her if I made poor choices.

“She was my excuse. ‘Hey, I can’t do that. My mom will kill me.’”

Bellace spoke of coping with emotions with equanimity.

“Kids need to be OK with their emotions,” he said. “Being mindful is about sitting with emotions, being in the moment. Ultimately, emotions don’t need to be escaped from.

“So many of society’s problems have to do with people running away from how they feel, whether it’s with drugs or gambling or so forth.”

Bellace talked of having the confidence to rise above the fray, to be an upstander rather than merely a bystander.

“That’s hard,” he readily acknowledged. “When you see something going on, when do you say, ‘That’s enough’?”

“If you’re surrounded by strong friends and family, you know that someone’s always got your back.”

Like many a good teacher, Bellace has an act. His myriad anecdotes and one-liners are integrated into the message. His comedic approach breaks down walls and quickly captivates audiences.

Through the laughter and cheering, however, he leaves each presentation content in the knowledge that he’s conveyed with utmost clarity his messages of

mindful reflection and positive attitudes.

“I love it when students go home and start a conversation with their parents about family history and healthy choices,” he said.

“On an institutional level, I love it when I can motivate students to start a group or take an existing group, put on some natural-high events, and carry the message forward.

“Getting a natural high is a lifelong thing that we have to reinforce.

“This is only the beginning.”

So what are Bellace’s natural highs?

“Cooking (Sicilian food), playing with my kids, surfing, and performing,” he said.

“I’m in pursuit of bringing in as many natural highs as I can.

“I want to practice what I preach.”

-- [Weldon Bradshaw](#)