



Dr. Matt Bellace Delivers a Natural High

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Within minutes of greeting the audience of mostly teen girls, Bellace had the audience laughing away any doubts. It was clear that this would be a different type of guest speaker, one who demonstrates the amazing things our girls can accomplish when surrounded by positive support in a very literal way. Bellace began his presentation with two groups of four student volunteers. Initially seated on chairs, the girls arranged themselves perpendicular to their neighbor and then laid back to support one another across their legs. Once arranged precisely and comfortably, Bellace pulled the chairs out from underneath the girls one-by-one. Between their shrieks and giggles, the girls remained in formation -- even when all the chairs were removed with Bellace briefly taking his seat among the group as added weight. They remained in position without collapsing. That was it; the tone was set, and this presentation would not be like anything the girls could've imagined.



In true comedic form, Bellace recounted stories of his life from youth, when he witnessed a sibling struggle with substance abuse; through college, where he lived and promoted a substance-free lifestyle; to adulthood, where his children continued teaching him valuable life lessons. An overarching theme rang clear -- you always have a choice. As situations and obstacles arise, you can choose to express your emotions in a healthy way. You can determine what to do to change your world, your environment. You can choose to respond to stress instead of reacting to it. Whether you use music or running or laughter to process your emotions, the outcome can reflect, in a healthier way, what some choose to find through drugs and alcohol.

While the stories and jokes drew the audience in, Bellace also offered a sobering reality aimed at educating everyone. He interjected facts about brain development and the chemical reactions that occur under the influence of laughter (which he classified as a "superpower") versus controlled substances. He put it in perspective for the crowd of teenagers before him: smoking marijuana before your brain is fully developed around age 25 could knock points off your IQ. A main component in marijuana -- the chemical THC -- mirrors a molecule the brain naturally produces, anandamide, to regulate motivation and pleasure. Laughter itself will release "feelgood" chemicals into the brain. Essentially, there are amazing things your body can do without the introduction of substances that can do more harm than good.

Throughout this presentation, Bellace used humor while reflecting on the challenges his older brother, who struggled with substance abuse starting as a teenager, faced in his life. His stories were funny, and he nailed the "Seth Rogan laugh" synonymous with pot smokers, but the reality he shared was that this path had not led his brother to success as an adult. Although stealing someone's microwave while high to make Hot Pockets may get laughs, that behavior does not set up one for success later in life.

Another story that resonated with the audience was of Bellace's experience as a college student at Bucknell. Bellace found that there were few social environments that promoted a substance-free lifestyle and, with the support of the school, founded the CALVIN & HOBBS (Creating A Lively Valuable Ingenious New Habit Of Being (at) Bucknell (and) Enjoying Sobriety) house, a refurbished fraternity house where sponsored events like bowling, live music and comedy (imagine that!) offer a refreshing alternative on campus. Given the success of Bellace's presentation, it would not be surprising if our girls are inspired to seek out these substance-free opportunities as they head into college -- or perhaps initiate their own.

Dr. Bellace is the author of the book, *A Better High* (Wyatt Mackenzie, 2012). He uses his background in neuropsychology to tailor his educational programs to the developmental stages of his audiences. His experience as a standup comic engages young people in a way that ensures this important messages about resilience, positive social support and finding one's own "natural high" resonates with them. Learn more about his programs for high school students at www.mattbellace.com/students/high-school.

Matt Bellace's presentation was brought to campus as part of the Wellness curriculum. Many thanks to Director of Wellness Katie Ryan Kantz, as well as Head of School Cathy McGehee, who had seen Bellace perform previously, for organizing his visit.