

Get high on laughter

Students hear comic turned motivator

May 12, 2017

BY RUTH EPSTEIN Republican-American



Motivational speaker and author Matt Bellace has Housatonic Valley Regional High School students take part in a trust exercise during his presentation this week. The program was brought to the school by the Northwest Corner Prevention Network. Ruth Epstein Republican-American

FALLS VILLAGE

Matt Bellace combines psychology and comedy to bring home the message about staying away from drugs.

The motivational speaker and author came to Housatonic Valley Regional High School this week to give a presentation that was sponsored by the Northwest Corner Prevention Network.

Bellace said his mother, trying to steer him toward a healthy path, sent Bellace to a leadership conference when he was a teenager.

"That experience changed my life forever," he said. "I met my four best friends there."

He went on to graduate from Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pa., with a bachelor's in biology and psychology, and a master's in biology. He then earned a doctorate in clinical neuropsychology from Drexel University in Philadelphia.

After college, he began doing stand-up comedy and weaving his two passions together.

As a speaker for 21 years, including 11 full-time, his method avoids scare tactics.

"I bring life into what I say," Bellace said.

He began the program with a trust exercise, bringing eight students up and having them lean back on chairs, which then were removed. The girls were able to stay up, but the boys fell to the floor.

"Support is crucial for mental health," Bellace said. "We need it from family, friends and teachers."

He told the students he was not trying to scare them, but to teach techniques for dealing with stress. It's been noted that high school students are the most stressed group because they're often sleep-deprived, and can be easily distracted by phone calls and text messages.

Bellace urged them to lean on healthy people, express their emotions to a good listener and find ways to channel anger. He also told them they have a choice on how to respond to pain in their lives.

"Natural highs are much better than chemical ones," he said, noting they can be gained through participation in sports, music, art and other healthy interests. "The best natural high is laughing."

The Northwest Corner Prevention Network works with youth and families to end drug abuse and teen drinking. The group sponsored a poster contest to go along with "Matt Bellace Day," and gave out cash prizes to the first-, second- and third-place winners.

A morning session of Bellace's program was held for the region's middle-school students.

Contact Ruth Epstein at kcsruthe@aol.com.