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Striving for a 'natural high'

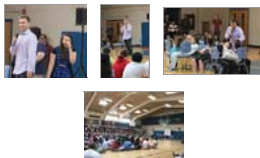
Speaker shares positive message at Ferri

Daniel Kittredge



(Sun Rise photos)

HAVING A LAUGH: Bellace involved a number of student volunteers in his presentation.



From a crowd of hundreds of eager, cheering students, Matt Bellace selected eight volunteers.

The four boys and four girls sat in two circles of chairs arranged perpendicular to one another, unsure at first of what the exercise would involve.

Bellace – a youth motivational speaker and stand-up comedian with a doctorate in clinical neuropsychology – asked the volunteers to lean backward so they were resting on each other.

Then, he and other volunteers began removing the chairs.

Just as Bellace predicted, the formations held, and the students remained in position through mutual support – at least at first, and the girls for longer than the boys. The demonstration filled the Nicholas A. Ferri Middle School gymnasium with excitement, and served to illustrate the central themes of Bellace's presentation.

"I'm definitely not an effective speaker if I don't have the support of the audience," he told the students. "The same is true of you in your lives."

Bellace – whose visit was sponsored by the Johnston Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition – has an extensive and diverse résumé. A native of New Jersey, he has spoken about natural highs and positive choices before more than a million people across the nation and world since 1995.

Bellace is a member of the National Speakers Association, author of the 2012 book "A Better High," and a contributing author for the National Geographic Kids book series "This or That." He was also a recurring comedian on the hit truTV show "World's Dumbest."

Bellace's presentation at Ferri was funny and engaging, but also touched frequently on the pain and negative consequences he has felt and witnessed in his life as a result of drugs and alcohol. After the death of their grandfather, he said, his older brother began partying in high school, and eventually failed out of college.

That shaped Bellace's future in ways he could not have predicted. While still in high school, he said, his parents sent him to a leadership camp – the Teen Institute of the Garden State, or TGIS – where he saw some of the nation's top motivational speakers, and ended up meeting his closest friends.

"It changed my life," he said.

Then, after his brother's unsuccessful college stint, he made a resolution to himself: "Not me."

Bellace abstains from alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, and has devoted himself to pursuing "natural highs" like the one he finds through performing. In high school, he was an accomplished three-sport athlete. While studying at Bucknell University, he began a student-run group focused on providing a positive, alternative social forum for students outside the party and fraternity scene.

Bellace said his interest is not in demonizing substances – "Scare tactics don't work," he stressed – but in helping young people understand what is possible, and how their choices can affect their future. Reaching middle school students is especially important, he said, given the changes and emotions children of that age group are experiencing.

"A lot of middle school students have strong feelings, but they don't want to tell anybody," he said. "You guys, from an early age, need to learn to deal with your emotions in a healthy way."



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Bellace led students through a relaxation exercise in which they closed their eyes and cleared their minds, recommending they do so for at least 20 minutes a day as a way to recharge.

"It's like a phone charger, he said. "You activate the part of the brain that controls reasoning and judgment."

Bellace also pointed to the power of laughter – calling it "the best natural high" – and urged the students to be accepting of, and compassionate toward, their peers.

"Your laughter, your acceptance, your ability to connect with other classmates, could change a life," he said.

For Bellace, performing is a "natural high" through which he continually finds joy. He urged the students to find their own "natural high," whatever it may be, and suggested the "Natural High" website (naturalhigh.org) as a resource to find guidance.

"I love performing because it's a risk ... if you're going to take risks, make sure they're positive," he said.

In another exercise, Bellace asked student volunteers to identify several songs by famous artists, including Adele, Pharrell, Eminem, and the Foo Fighters. Each of the songs, he said, represented a means through which the artist had channeled and processed their emotions. He also pointed to the example of actors, musicians, political leaders, and other highly accomplished people – many of whom used negative emotions as fuel to drive their success.

"How do you take pain and make some beautiful music with it?" he said.

Aside from his work, Bellace said he finds inspiration from his family. He is married with two children, a son and daughter. They "make me want to be more patient," he said.

"Love exists ... to inspire us to want to be better," he said.

At the conclusion of the program, Ferri Principal Dennis Morrell thanked Bellace for his visit and addressed the students.

"I hope many of you will take something away from this," he said.

Afterward, Bellace complimented the students for their attentiveness, and said the Ferri presentation was a success.

"I love it when a program exceeds expectations," he said.

Bellace said early in his career, he found middle school audiences difficult, but he has grown to find the energy of the younger students infectious.

"How I approach the speaking has a lot to do with not speaking down to them," he said. "A lot of adults see them as kids, which they are, but they're not little kids, they're pre-teens, they're early adolescents, their frontal lobe is starting to develop to the point that they're seeing things that aren't really consistent with things that they've learned growing up ... They're trying to figure out the world, and I think it's important to not just talk down to them and assume they don't know anything and tell them, 'This is how you should behave.'"

To that end, Bellace said he ultimately hopes students leave his presentation with the understanding that "they have a choice."

"You know, in this culture, with so much drug use going on, whether it's recreational street drugs or pharmaceutical drugs, I want them to know that they can choose other ways to feel good," he said. "These natural highs are good for their brain, they're fun, and they build skills. On a personal level, that's what I want them to learn."

Bellace also praised the Johnston Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition and its coordinator, Patti Sweet, for arranging his visit to Johnston.

"To me in my work, groups like the Johnston Substance Abuse Coalition are vital to my success," he said. "The creation of the coalitions has really changed what I do, in a good way. I find that the coalitions are really connected with the community, and they're also very well networked, especially here in Rhode Island."

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