

# The Phillipian

## Managing Emotions and Risk-Taking: Matt Bellace Emphasizes 'Natural Highs'

By William Yue



M.Zhang/The Phillipian

*Matt Bellace merges psychology, public speaking, and comedy to stress the importance of natural highs and the dangers of illicit drug use.*

Holding a wooden box, Matt Bellace walked across the stage, encouraging the audience members to clap whenever he opened the lid.

Bellace said, “Wouldn’t it be great to have a box like this in our lives, if we’re having a bad day, or when it’s five degrees outside, to have that love and support [whenever we open the lid]? The closest thing we can get to the box are the people in our lives: friends, family, and teachers.”

A psychologist, professional speaker, and stand up comedian, Bellace discouraged the use of cannabis, instead promoting exercise, meditation, charitable acts, and other “natural highs” as ways to achieve happiness healthfully during his talk on Friday, February 1. His presentation was a part of the Empathy, Balance, and Inclusion programming (E.B.I.) for Uppers.

To begin the event, Jamie Phinney, an E.B.I. Course Head, introduced Bellace in the Kemper Auditorium. Bellace hoped to discuss three topics: positive risk-taking around supportive friends, expressing emotions in healthy ways, and achieving natural highs. As a comedian and speaker, Bellace presented with humor and interaction, often inviting students on stage, but with his Ph.D. in clinical neuropsychology, he interlaced the presentation with personal stories and statistics.

Phinney was excited to invite Bellace to come to speak to the Uppers after Susan Esty, Director of Wellness Education, who had invited him to her previous school of Pingree, suggested him.

“He was a proven product. We had a lot of really good reviews on the way he would conduct himself and the way he would connect with our kids. I was blown away. I thought he was phenomenal. The way that the Uppers fed off of his energy was unlike anything that I’ve seen so far. He had such good ideas, and his presentation was so balanced with facts, but also comedy, laughter, and meditation, that it was really the perfect presentation,” said Phinney.

In college, Bellace formed a student group which spread awareness on the benefits of natural highs. According to Bellace, however, he had to choose between his three passions: stand-up comedy, a career in psychology, or professional speaking. In the end, he decided to pursue professional speaking, a path which he believes was the most fulfilling for him.

Bellace said, “When I was in grad school, as hard as it was to balance the two: I was speaking, and I began doing standup on the weekends. It was a crazy kind of life when I finished my Ph.D. because I was doing equal parts stand-up in clubs and speaking at schools while trying to finish my dissertation. It was also a very creative time in my life, but I realized that I had to pick a path. I can’t pick three careers, so I openly decided that speaking was more fulfilling for me”

Bellace's presentation began with a physical demonstration, where he invited nine students on stage. The students sat on chairs, each facing different directions, and physically leaned back on each other, forming a square link. Then, Bellace proceeded to remove the chairs underneath them, one-by-one, until the students were left supporting each other with their own legs.

Peter Ling '20 loved the message of this activity, which he interpreted as surrounding yourself with positive influences and choosing friends who will support you through difficulties in life.

Ling said, "He used [the activity] to demonstrate the importance of how your friends support you and how you can't do anything without them."

Bellace continued the talk with ways to manage your emotions: meditation, sleep, and breathing exercises.

When Bellace's grandfather passed away, his brother resorted to using cannabis, but Bellace turned to a breathing technique, used by Navy Seals in extreme situations for calmness, and channeled the loss of a loved one to fuel his passions.

Bellace said in his talk, "There's more light now, more powerful daytime-like light, screens in our face, and it all suppresses a hormone called melatonin and disturbs our sleep, not to mention the content coming through there which keeps you up. I can't solve all these problems, but I can tell you that you're the first generation that needs to rest your brain. Once a day, I do it, twenty minutes, from 4:00 to 4:20—yes I get the irony of that, I don't need weed—I sit in a chair, and I breathe, and the difference is profound."

Bellace added another point, which covered effective risk-taking through sports or music. Hywot Ayana '20 connected with Bellace's idea that risks taken now can bring happiness later on in life.

Ayana said, "He spoke about the kind of risk-taking that makes you happier in twenty years and the kind of risk-taking that you can reflect back on and think 'that was a great moment,' whether or not it went positively or negatively. I hope that is something that I can carry with me growing up that when I take that sort of risk I'm growing as a person, and I think that really strengthens the idea that your mistakes and failures can help you get where you want to go."

Students like Zev Barden '20 enjoyed the presentation and thought Bellace was an excellent speaker. He liked the emphasis placed on achieving natural highs rather than turning to substances.

Barden said, "It was a good message. It's such a big issue at Andover this year—I think especially this year, but it's been going on for a while—is this desire to turn to either substance or to abuse these unnatural highs.

The studies that he displayed and the way that he was able to communicate the importance of natural highs and feelings of euphoria that would outweigh the 'benefit' of any harmful substance."

Other students, like Marianne Bautista '20, found the event's interactivity appealing to the audience in addition to its content.

Bautista said, "Other than having a Ph.D., he is also a standup comedian. His whole presentation was very funny and interactive, and it appealed to my peers and people my age. He included statistics and personal experiences that really helped us get to know him better, and also knew how to speak using our language and things we understood, and it was a very successful presentation."

Editor's Note: Peter Ling is an Advertising Manager for The Phillipian