

## Funny Ph.D. Encourages Kids to Get High ... Naturally

Posted by [Natalie Davis](#) (Editor) , April 18, 2012 at 02:09 PM

When Matt Bellace was in high school, he says he lacked confidence and had no sense of his own abilities. But as a teen, he received a precious gift: an opportunity to hear a positive message, to learn that he had something to offer and to do some good.

A few years later, after earning his Ph.D. in clinical neuropsychology from Drexel University, he was [Dr. Matt Bellace](#), a psychologist, author and stand-up comedian.

He was also a man with a mission—to keep kids away from drugs and alcohol. So he took his talents, returned to the place that opened his eyes to his own greatness, and paid his gift forward to other kids who needed to hear how special they are.

Bellace gives that gift to Parsippany teens April 25 when he brings his 2012 Natural High Comedy Tour to town.

The evening will feature performances by Bellace and fellow comics Andy Pitz and Moody McCarthy. The doctor will also share thoughts with teenagers and parents in the audience about how they can avoid substance abuse and other destructive behaviors by opting for "natural highs."

Bellace's journey toward the "natural high" concept started when he was in high school and attended a conference called the Teen Institute of the Garden State.

Now known as the [Lindsey Meyer Teen Institute](#), the 25-year-old program instills positivity in youth, shows teens how fantastic each one truly is and steers them down a drug-free path.

Bellace credits Teen Institute with building his self-worth and motivating him to achieve.

"I started as a student and ended up as a counselor," he said. "Sixteen years ago, they gave me my first speaking gig and they've hired me back every year.

"[Teen Institute] made me think, 'You can actually do this as a career. I never thought I could, but long story short, here I am.'"

Bellace travels the U.S. and Canada spreading his anti-drug message at high schools and colleges. His stand-up career is a separate endeavor, but comedy is a big part of his pro-teen work as well and a great way to sell youth on the idea of bypassing illicit substances for the joy of natural highs.

"Comedy is the way to reach young people with this message," he said. "Young people have been screamed at, lectured to and intimidated with the message of not to do drugs. Coming at it from a comedic standpoint is much more approachable. I've had students tell me this, so I know it's a more effective way."

As to how a psychologist ends up riffing at venues such as New York's Caroline's on Broadway, Bellace has a quick answer.

"Family dysfunction," the Manhattanite deadpanned before bursting into laughter. "No, seriously, you have to have a combination of a sense of humor and the drive to pursue a career. A lot of comedians become comedians after becoming lawyers or something else serious."

Despite the humor employed in his lectures and teen-focused comedy shows, Bellace says the jokes allow him to make a serious connection with young people.

And it's laughter that sells teenagers on the notion of going for natural highs.

"A student group I created in college had the concept to put on Natural High events on the weekend as alternatives to the party scene," he explained. "[It could be] bowling or ice skating or bringing a comedian to town, or paintball, hayrides, dance parties.

"Today, students put their own personal stamp on [their Natural High events]," Bellace continued. "I encourage students on their own or as a part of student groups to come up with their own ideas to have fun in a healthy way."

Bellace has written a book on the subject too. "A Better High" seeks to inspire teens to use their imaginations to come up with fun and positive ways to stay drug-free.

"Parsippany's bought 110 copies of my book to give away, so I'll be signing them at the [April 25] event," he said.

Bellace said his Par-Troy show will be different from his usual youth lectures.

"That show is unique because it's a comedy night," he said. "At some time I will talk about natural highs, but I'd love the audience to take laughs—and a copy of my book."

Bellace said his Natural High method helps keep youngsters off drugs and also helps them cope with stresses, tragedies and difficult situations.

"Students are incredibly resilient, and their desire to laugh is pretty strong," he said, adding that natural highs give youth "healthier ways to cope with life's problems. Social connection, going out and being part of a larger group can keep kids safe and on a positive path."