

The Philadelphia Inquirer

A punch line, a talk with punch Matt Bellace spreads his message about the dangers of drugs, alcohol - one joke at a time.

By Rusty Pray INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Posted: November 12, 2006

Matt Bellace had them rolling in the aisles - exactly where he wanted them.

Bellace, a motivational speaker and stand-up comic, was making the freshman class at Cherry Hill West High School laugh with jokes, anecdotes and interactive skits while delivering a dead-serious message about the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse.

"My goal is to reach kids, and comedy for me is a way to do that," Bellace said. "It disarms them. If they're laughing, I know they're listening. So when I get to the meat of my message, I know they're there."

Bellace did four assemblies at West late last month, and then in a rare convergence of his schedules, worked a couple nights of stand-up at Rascals, a comedy club in Cherry Hill. He also has presented programs at other South Jersey high schools, including Deptford.

The students and teachers at West gave Bellace rave reviews.

"I thought it was hysterical," said Michael Belmonte, a 14-year-old freshman.

After taking in an earlier program for senior students, activities coordinator Barbara Mitidieri said she hadn't "seen a reaction from staff and students like this in a long time. There were teachers laughing and participating who never take part in anything."

Bellace said he uses his club gigs to work on his material and timing for his high school speaking engagements, although the routines differ. He plays from 70 to 80 stand-up sets a year, not quite half the number of his high school speaking engagements.

"I'm a motivational speaker and a comedian - in that order," he said. "You can't be hired by Cherry Hill and come in and not be funny, and you can't practice in front of an audience anywhere except the clubs."

His approach was what caught the eye of Barbara Rakoczy, West's student assistance counselor. She booked him, using funding provided by the nonprofit Cherry Hill Alliance on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, after watching him deliver a program last year in the Philadelphia suburbs.

"You don't want someone preachy," she said. "You don't want just lecturing, giving a message they could get in health class. He's just an overall great find for us."

Bellace, 32, has a doctorate in clinical neuropsychology from Drexel University, a master's degree in biology, and a bachelor's degree in biology and psychology from Bucknell University. He grew up in Montclair, N.J., and lives in Manhattan with his wife, Dara, also a psychologist. His father grew up in Collingswood, and he has family there and in Cherry Hill.

Bellace decided he wanted to live a life free of drugs and alcohol when he was in middle school. He had an older brother "who made poor choices in high school. After watching all the drama, I'd didn't want to go there."

An even bigger influence, though, was a conference he attended in 1989 as a sophomore at Montclair High School. It was a prevention and leadership gathering called the Teen Institute of the Garden State.

"That was the true motivator," he said. "That was where I saw my first real motivational speakers. They were clear. They were funny. They left a mark. I thought to myself, 'What a great job to have.' "

He's been doing it for 11 years.

Much of the material in his program comes from personal experience.

"I talk about not drinking," Bellace said. "Do you know how hard it was for me in college to hear, 'Dude, I got so wasted last night'? . . . and you know nothing smart is going to follow that."

He has fashioned that social discomfort into one of those jokes with a point he tells in his program.

It goes like this:

"Dude, I was so wasted last night I peed on my roommate's computer. What did you do last night, Matt? I bought a new computer. Stay out of my room."

Contact staff writer Rusty Pray at 856-779-3894 or rpray@phillynews.com.