

Local youth encouraged to seek natural highs

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PLATTSBURGH — When Matt Bellace interviews longtime drug addicts, he often asks them to describe the source of the best feeling in their lives.

"And the answers that come back aren't 'the first time I did heroin,'" the professional speaker and author of the 2012 book, "A Better High," told attendees of Tuesday's 11th-annual Youth Leadership Conference at Clinton Community College.

Instead, he noted, the responses are often memories like, "that time I scored the winning goal in that game in high school" or "the girl I fell in love with."

"So natural things, ultimately, are perceived by the brain as the best because the brain knows the difference between the high that you gave it and the natural thing that just occurred," said Bellace, also a standup comedian with a doctorate in clinical neuropsychology.

This marks the second time he has spoken at the local event, which invites 15 students from each high school in Clinton County to participate in activities designed to inspire and nurture leadership qualities.

BE YOURSELF

This year's conference, with 140 students registered, was presented by the Clinton County Youth Bureau, Cornell Cooperative Extension, SUNY Center for Neurobehavioral Health and Clinton County Employment & Training Agency. It was put together by a committee of 12 students from seven schools.

The 2015 theme of "be yourself; everyone else is already taken," is meant to promote "individuality and standing up and leading the way," Planning Committee member and Saranac High School senior Chris Fall told the Press-Republican in a separate interview.

In selecting Bellace as the event's keynote speaker, noted fellow committee member and Plattsburgh High School senior Risha Sheni, "our whole point is not to talk about, like, drug awareness or anything like that, but it's more just about being a leader, and part of that is being able to get a natural high."



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ASHLEIGH LIVINGSTON/STAFF

PHOTOComedian and author Matt Bellace shares his knowledge of achieving natural highs through love, laughter and exercise with Clinton County high-school students at the 11th-annual Youth Leadership Conference at Clinton Community College in Plattsburgh. The event is funded by the Clinton County Youth Bureau and features several character-building workshops.

LOVE INSPIRES

One source of such a high, Bellace said during his presentation, is love.

"You can love your friends; you can love your grandparents; you can love your dog," he said. "All these forms of love involve one brain chemical."

Oxytocin, he explained, is released when one assists someone else, creating a "helper's high," and also when one falls in love.

"I think one of the reasons why love exists other than to reproduce the species is to inspire us to want to be better," Bellace said.

His young son, for example, inspires him to want to be more patient, he noted, "because I'll tell you right now, little kids are really odd."

VALUE OF EXERCISE

Exercise also offers a natural high, according to Bellace, who coauthored the National Geographic series "This or That" and has appeared on the truTV show "World's Dumbest."

"It turns out that exercise (is) more effective than ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) medications for helping you focus (and) more effective than antidepressants for lifting your mood," he said.

And laughter, Bellace added, is the best natural high.

"The human brain while laughing looks virtually identical to the human brain on a drug called cocaine," he said. "I'm not going to argue that laughing is a more intense high than cocaine, but I know it's a better high."

Besides, he noted, laughing won't cause a hangover.

3 WORKSHOPS EACH

Following Bellace's presentation, attendees went off to participate in three workshops of their choice.

They could select from 13 sessions presented by local volunteers and covering such topics as choosing a career path, the risks of social media, basic self-defense techniques, ways to serve the community and geocaching.

"I really hope that they take away from this some valuable life skills that they'll put to use in the future," Planning Committee member and Northeastern Clinton High School junior Spencer Parsons told the Press-Republican.

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