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School of knock-knocks: Comedy schools aren't all just for laughs

By Eddie Vega

A sudden horror: the kind that sears itself into memory and resurfaces in recurring nightmares, the kind that wrecks nascent careers, the kind aspiring comic Bradley Moore experienced at age 6.

Alone on stage in a room large enough to swallow his lanky frame, he faced a caboodle of glaring parents and other children his age. The seconds passed in his mind like hours in detention. He played with the bottom of his San Francisco Giants T-shirt, waiting for the words that would free him and his audience from the embarrassing lock. But having forgotten even how to speak, Bradley moped off.

"He was sullen and looking stunned," recalled his mother, Carolyn Moore, 42. "But something funny happened on the way to the crying room."

That something was Bradley's teacher, Terry Sand, who runs Comedy Kids, a small comedy

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Dan DaSalva, 15, performs his stand-up routine for Kids N' Comedy teachers Will McKinley and Stu Morton at the Gotham Comedy Club in Manhattan. Enrollment at comedy programs for kids is on the rise across the country. (Eddie Vega / CNS)



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school in San Francisco that caters to children ages 5 to 12. As a member of Robin Williams's comedy troupe Papaya Juice before Williams left for instant stardom on the "Mork & Mindy" television show, Sand knew funny. She also has more than 20 years of teaching experience.

She didn't tell Bradley any jokes to cheer him up. Instead she asked him to look at the experience as a gift. "Your mind going blank is like having a blank canvas," she recalled telling him. "You can put the paint anywhere you want and make anything you want of it."

She then gave him some strategies for loosening a knotted tongue, like asking the audience for a suggestion and playing off the response.

Primed with these new skills, Bradley has not walked off since. "It's easier now to come up with things to say," Bradley, now 10, says with relish. "It's fun to be on stage, not knowing what's coming next."

His mother sees invaluable life skills that could take him beyond a career in comedy to success in the boardroom.

"Whether or not he pursues comedy, these are skills that will help him later in the business world and certainly in life," said Moore, a director of human resources for a Silicon Valley tech



Dan DaSalva, 15, performs his stand-up routine during a Kids N' Comedy workshop at the Gotham Comedy Club in Manhattan. Enrollment at comedy programs for kids is on the rise across the country. (Eddie Vega / CNS)



Ryan Drum, 12, performs his stand-up routine during a Kids N' Comedy workshop at the Gotham Comedy Club in Manhattan. Enrollment at comedy programs for kids is on the rise across the country. (Eddie Vega / CNS)



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company. In her line of work, she sees how employees with few social skills sometimes struggle when communicating directly with clients. She does not want that fate for her children and believes comedy training will help. And on that point, she is not alone.

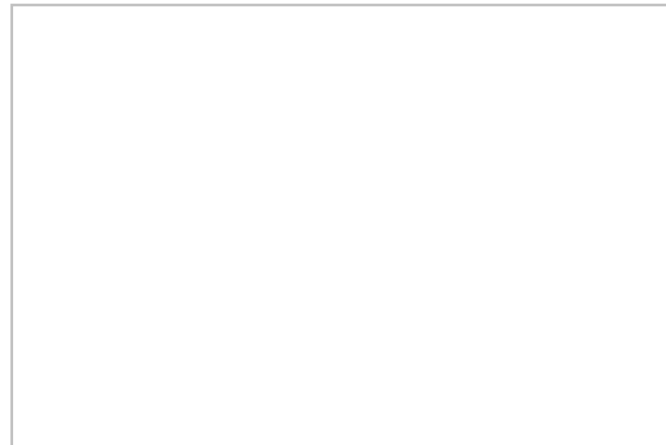
Enrollment in children's comedy schools is on the rise across the country. Many parents, like Moore, are not looking to produce stars as much as well-socialized children who will do well whatever direction their lives take. Moreover, they get to laugh while they do it.

At Second City, the largest comedy school in the United States and Canada with more than 15,000 students, enrollment in programs for children as young as 4 is up 57 percent over the last three years and is outpacing the growth of the adult programs, officials say. Most of Second City's schools in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Chicago, Detroit, New York and Toronto are at capacity, and some, like the one in Los Angeles, have had to move to larger facilities to accommodate the surge of new students.

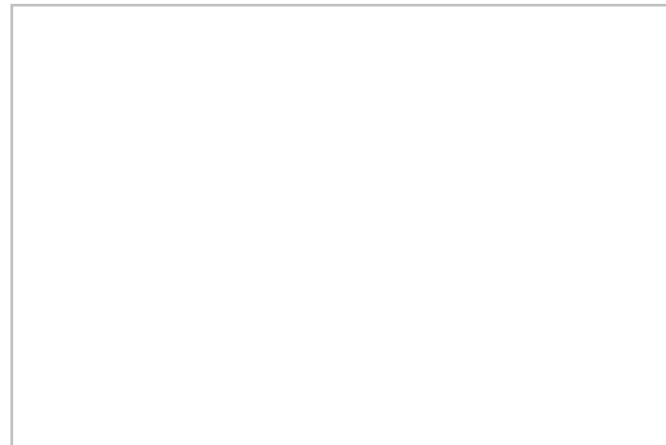
Rob Chambers, 46, president of the Second City training centers, understands the programs' appeal for parents. "If these kids become stars, that's great," he said, "but in the meantime they learn to be creative thinkers, confident communicators and team players." As part of



Ryan Drum, 12, performs his stand-up routine during a Kids N' Comedy workshop at the Gotham Comedy Club in Manhattan. Enrollment at comedy programs for kids is on the rise across the country. (Eddie Vega / CNS)



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Don Drum, 44, takes notes as his son

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their routines, students are asked to invent scenes together and to play other characters.

"And because they are asked to play other people their own age," he added, "they develop greater empathy for others, an essential part of being a good citizen."

Dr. Carrie Lobman, a professor at Rutgers' Graduate School of Education, agrees that the curricula of comedy schools are on sound pedagogical ground. "Life itself is an improvisation for which there is no script," she said. "Improv allows children to do what they don't know how to do, which is what learning and development is. For example, when they play at being firefighters, they are both the kids they are and who they are becoming."

But she sees another reason for the spike in enrollment, a subject she explores in a forthcoming book she co-wrote with Matthew Lundquist, "Unscripted Learning: Using Improv Activities Across the K-12 Curriculum." "These schools are fulfilling a role that public schools have abandoned," she said. "Lack of imagination in budget cuts has eliminated many programs that allow children to be creative."

Perhaps so, but for Jonathan Kolleeny, 50, the reasons are closer to home. He supports his son Alejandro's comedic studies at New York's Kids 'N Comedy because, he says, his son loves stand-up and he loves his son.

Alejandro, 16, has dreamed of doing stand-up since he first heard a George Carlin monologue. Alejandro's own humor has a Carlinesque quality that focuses on the odd things that happen in daily life, like falling asleep while chewing gum and waking up with a fat gummy ball at the back of his mouth. As he continues honing his comedy craft, he auditions for television and movie work about seven times a year.

In the meantime, his father is impressed with how attuned to life his son has become.

"I'm always thinking about what I see and hear," Alejandro said. "There are jokes

Ryan, 12, discusses his newest stand-up routine at a Kids N' Comedy workshop at the Gotham Comedy Club in Manhattan. Enrollment in comedy programs for kids is on the rise across the country. (Eddie Vega/CNS)

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everywhere you look, if you look hard enough.”

Ryan Drum, 12, uses his comedy to connect with his autistic twin brother, Chris. He has been trekking from New Jersey to attend the Kids 'N Comedy program for two years to learn how to connect with an audience. The effort has paid off. When he realized that his brother responded to movies, Ryan memorized lines from his brother's favorites and delivered them with funny voices, Mickey Mouse and Harry Potter among others.

“That is something that has certainly brought the family closer,” said Don Drum, Ryan's father.

Onstage, Ryan performs a routine about always being given the children's menu at restaurants and his failing efforts to order from the adult menu, a tender subject for those in his age group.

“He appeals to other kids his age,” his father said, “but he gives us access to the special way children view the world and helps us better understand them.”

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