

Comic helps teachers put laughs in learning

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Suzanne Starr/The Arizona Republic
Stand-up comic Tim Davis will teach his craft at Paradise Valley Community College. He has taught comedians, performers, teachers and social workers.

His passion for the arts may never win him an Academy Award.

But for the past 12 years, performance coach Tim Davis has helped countless actors, models, writers, comics, salespeople and social workers overcome stage fright, and squelch negative thought patterns through innovative psychological techniques.

Yet not before he overcame his own performance anxiety using cognitive behavioral therapy. A comic for 20 years, the New York City native has appeared on The Joan Rivers Show and The Montel Williams Show.

Davis has coached professional comedians on Comedy Central, The David Letterman Show and The Tonight Show With Jay Leno and has trained salespeople at Sony. He's conducted comedy classes to help everyday people realize their dreams of becoming comedians and motivated New York senior citizens to overcome their depression and anxieties through comedy.

With his 6-foot, 6-inch frame, large, expressive hands and deep laugh lines etched in his face, his passion for comedy can't be overlooked.

Now, Davis is on a comedy crusade to aid local high school teachers and students.

On Wednesday, the former professional stand-up comedian will pilot a one-day seminar at Paradise Valley Community College. The class will give Phoenix and Scottsdale high school teachers an opportunity to revitalize their teaching methods and renew passion in their subject areas, Davis said.

Although, until recently, Davis has focused on coaching business and performing arts specialists in New York and Los Angeles, he is now hoping to help solve Arizona's dropout problem, recently reported the worst in the nation.

"American education, unlike European and Asian, encourages intellectual debate," Davis said. "We need to encourage students to perform to the maximum levels of their talent, which sometimes translates into debate with the instructor. Not all instructors are psychologically prepared to deal with the possible rejection of their viewpoints."

To avoid teachers' shutting down under the criticism, Davis teaches them the "non-attachment" technique, or not taking criticism personally and letting it hurt their feelings.

"The teacher sharpens the ability to serve as a conduit for their talent and tap into their field of expertise," he said.

Davis uses the parallels between stand-up comedy and teaching, emphasizing humor as a proven communication tool in audience attention as well as learning retention.

"Comedy writers have made a fortune in writing books of 'one-liners' for corporate executives to use as ice-breakers for speeches to get the audiences' attention and have them retain the material," he said.

Davis said that a major problem in education is that years of teaching the same material can obliterate a teacher's enthusiasm.

"The key is to connect to your passion about the material and 'riff' into your talent at will," he said.

"Robin Williams is great at riffing the punch line," he said. "If one doesn't work, he comes out with another. Having the courage to just let it come out without writing it first is the principal lesson."

After successful completion of the pilot seminar, Davis hopes to take his comedy instruction directly to high school classrooms where he wants to target the students at risk.

"Many students are socially inhibited, lack confidence and are emotionally naïve," he said. "Stand-up comedy classes could help them find their talents, not only overcoming performance anxiety, but also learning to think on their feet without fear of rejection. Gaining that confidence could help them make choices and solve problems without turning to drugs or ending up in jail."

Davis already has seen positive results among local students he has taught at PVCC and Rascals Comedy Club.

With Davis' help, Saguaro High School student Michael Colucci, 16, sent a tape to New York and got positive feedback from Ray Ramano, star of the Everyone Loves Raymond show.

Thunderbird High School student Maryn Herberg, 18, said, "Tim taught us how to react to an audience, how to be comfortable on stage and take criticism."

Xavier High School student Kathryn Bode, 17, added, "He definitely built our confidence. He taught us that your life is a story and your whole life is material for comedy. You can never run out."

To reserve a spot for Davis' Stand-Up Comedy Performance Techniques for Teachers' seminar on June 12, call PVCC Continuing Education at (602) 787-6800.