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By Laura E. Rodgers

### **Comedian Inspires Laughs in the Classroom**

Martha Cockerham walks to the front of the room and raps obnoxiously on the dry erase board. She gesticulates wildly and swivels her hips to an imaginary beat.

"That's great!" Tim Davis bellows from the back of the room.

No, Cockerham is not mastering the latest dance craze -- the Jamestown Middle School teacher is learning how to utilize comedic techniques to improve student learning during a day-long seminar held at Valleybrook Technical Center on High Point Road.

The seminars came to the area for a two-day stand due to Dustin's GreenHouse Fund, a scholarship fund started in memory of Dustin Green, a Ragsdale graduate who lost his life in an automobile accident last April. The seminar, titled "Transforming from Teacher to Learning Coach: Stand-Up Comedy Performance Techniques for Teachers," was free to Guilford County middle and high school teachers.

Tim Davis, a 20-year veteran of stand-up comedy, employs humor and cognitive restructuring techniques to show teachers how to make the classroom a more inviting, successful place both for students and themselves. Davis also coaches stand-up comedy and his techniques for minimizing stage fright have been featured on 48 Hours on CBS, The Montel Williams Show and in The New York Times.

About 20 Guilford County teachers of all ages and skill levels jumped at the chance to improve communication with their students.

"What I'd like to get out of this is to gain and keep the attention of the kids," says rookie Jamestown Middle School teacher Kevin Thoma.

Davis draws a close parallel between stand-up comedy and teaching. He says both are performance arts and can be very intimidating for the performer. Throughout the seminar, he shows teachers how to tap into their passion for teaching and turn it into appropriate, engaging humor that will get students excited about learning.

"A student will learn from you if they like you," he says matter-of-factly.

Jamestown Middle School facilitator Mary Ann Boone agrees. "Teachers need to lighten up their classrooms. If they're sour with their kids, their kids will be sour with them."

Years of stand-up comedy in front of the toughest audiences combined with Davis' study at New York's Institute of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy give him deep insight into the psychology of being funny.

"You can only succeed to the level you're willing to fail," he says.

Davis tells the teachers to stop placing value on how students respond to them in the moment.

"Your self-esteem can't hinge on that," he explains.

"We attach a label to ourselves for success or failure because of things we do," says Jamestown Middle School teacher Mandy Jo Limbo. "Because one thing doesn't go over well doesn't mean I'm a bad teacher."

Davis believes that freeing themselves from such thoughts enables teachers to be more creative and to take more risks. He says that people who place less value on immediate reactions of others have more self-confidence and perform better.

"That's really the point," he explains, "to have that self-confidence and give it to [students] so they can perform."

For more information on Dustin's GreenHouse Fund, visit [www.dustinsgreenhouse.org](http://www.dustinsgreenhouse.org).