

Learning to overcome personal fears, insecurities and loss through laughter



A scene from the Improv for Ron show, a fundraising performance held each spring. *Photo courtesy HARRY HARVEY*

Shore Fun Improv Teaches Students Life Skills Through Comedy

By George Woolston

Slowly but surely your nerves are building – imagine you’re sitting in a rollercoaster car, slowly being pulled to the top of the ride’s first big drop. However, instead of the ‘clink clink clink clink’ of the chain sending butterflies up from your stomach and into your throat, it’s the roll of a pair of dice by your partner.

Then, there’s a pause. Your car has reached the roller coaster’s summit. Your partner makes their move. They begin to approach, acting wildly, speaking in a crazy voice and trying to fill their boot with carrots. And just like the feeling of exhilaration you experience as your rollercoaster car finally makes it over the summit and speeds down the track and into loops and corkscrews, you step over a line of masking tape and onto the stage, wildly kick out your leg, pull off your shoe and ask, “Well, how many carrots do you need?”

The stage, a rectangle box marked off by masking tape on the floor, belongs to Shore Fun Improv.

The program is run by Point Pleasant Borough resident Harry Harvey and his fellow Manasquan High School teacher Jamie Mawn.

Sponsored by Manasquan Recreation, it offers five sessions of four to six improv workshops for kids from Ocean and Monmouth counties ages 10 through 17.

It's Mr. Harvey, a South Jersey native, began doing improv in college and was a founding member of the Philadelphia-based ComedySportz team. He began teaching improv with Mr. Mawn as part of an acting and writing camp they started 15 years ago.

"It started slowly, improv would be part of the acting camp, and as the years went on it was pretty clear most kids really enjoyed the improv," said Mr. Harvey.

"The kids really loved it," Mr. Mawn agreed.

As a result, the teaching duo founded the name Shore Fun Improv three years ago and shifted from teaching the improv classes over the summer at their acting and writing camps to Friday nights. According to Mr. Mawn, having the class on a Friday night offered students an alternative to possibly finding themselves in a peer-pressure situation.

"Parents could drop their kids off and then go out for dinner or something, then come back and pick their kids up. Parents loved it, and the kids feel like 'hey, I have something to do on Friday night,' and that logic kind of really blossomed for us," said Mr. Mawn.

Improv is a form of live theater in which the plot, characters and dialogue of a game, scene or story are made up in the moment. Suggestions from the audience, or some other source of inspiration are often used to get started.

While the end goal of Mr. Harvey and Mr. Mawn is to teach their improv students how to be funny and create a hilarious scene in an instant, they also want to instill team building, academic, personal and social skills in their students as well.

"It's really funny when you're expressing who you are, but slowly but surely the more you do this the more you begin to accept who you are, let your imagination go," said Mr. Harvey. "Spontaneity, intuition, those don't get taught much in school anymore, everything is so standardized now. You can't write a standardized essay if you can't think fast," he added.

One of the best moments that, as teachers, they get to witness is when a reserved or shy student is able to break out of their shell.

"It's incredible," said Mr. Harvey.

According to Mr. Harvey, the class also can help students cope with or overcome a personal loss as well.

"[It helps] people who maybe have been depressed, or we've also had a pretty good effect on people who maybe have experienced loss, or are mourning.

"You can even see it over the course of six weeks, or even over the span of one session, people come in and they're shy, sticking to the corners and by the end of it everyone is talking and socializing, and that's pretty cool," said Jack Masterson, a former student who continued to perform in college and now help teach the workshop sessions.

“I took Mr. Harvey’s improv and acting class in high school, and it definitely helped from a confidence perspective,” said Mr. Masterson. “I was in the class with probably four of my good friends and – you get up on stage and you’re really nervous at first, but as soon as you say something, even if it’s not meant to be funny – if people laugh, everybody in the room kind of relaxes and you just feel more confident in yourself,” he added.

Sitting in on one of the Shore Fun Improv workshop sessions, it’s evident that being shy is not an option. Even for a reporter.

Each session begins with a series of simple warm up games, such as word games or one-on-one activities that are designed to get the energy up in the room and shake off the nerves. Then the lessons and games begin, such as ‘imitate,’ where one partner rolls a dice to decide what kind of character they are going to be and their scene partner has to imitate their gestures and quirks.

There is ‘high status, low status,’ designed to teach the students how to develop status-driven characters, and ‘expert talker’ where one person is required to give a speech on a topic they know nothing about, such as the intricacies of Norwegian cat grooming, and then field questions from a panel.

The room where the sessions are held is located at the Manasquan Recreation Annex. The stage, an 8 x 4-foot rectangle marked out on the floor by masking tape, is at the front of the room. Three rows of chairs face it where the students will sit to watch each other perform. If there is an open seat located closer to the front row, they are told to move up and fill it to foster a sense of inclusion and participation, according to Mr. Masterson.

Mr. Harvey and Mr. Mawn also hold an annual show each spring at Manasquan High School called Improv for Ron. The show is a fundraiser to raise money for the Sgt. Ronald A. Kubik Memorial Scholarship, which is awarded to graduating Manasquan High School students who embody Ron’s spirit. According to Shore Fun’s website, Ron Kubik, MHS class of 2006, was a U.S. Army Ranger who gave his life in Afghanistan in April 2010 saving the lives of five fellow Rangers, five Afghan soldiers, and 19 Afghani women and children. For his “heroism in combat,” he was awarded the Silver Star, the military’s third highest honor.

“He was in the acting class and used to play these games,” said Mr. Harvey “To do this, you have let go of all your fears and you have to get outside of your comfort zone, and you have to think of other people, and it’s all the qualities that would make a great ranger, make you a great person ... there’s a lot of risk and bravery involved [in doing improv] and that’s why we like that the kids do it.

“They do this thing that they never thought they could do, just like Ronnie.”

For more information about Shore Fun Improv, you can visit www.shorefunimprov.com. If you have a child or know someone who is interested but maybe on the fence about trying it out or maybe a little younger than 10 years old, you can reach out to Mr. Harvey or Mr. Mawn.

“We’ll say alright, you know, send them along and see if they like it. And usually, they do,” said Mr. Mawn.