

Make 'em laugh: Bill Bushart teaches plumbers, clerks and social workers the art of stand-up comedy

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Janet Trost steps onstage and into the spotlight in a large, dimly lit room at Joey's Comedy Club in Livonia.

She clasps the microphone in her right hand and fidgets with the cord in the other. A petite brunette, Trost, 46, is a social worker, mother of two college-age daughters and single again after more than 20 years of marriage.

"Hello," Trost says in a soft voice. "I'm Janet and I'm a recovering good girl."

For the next few minutes, Trost cracks jokes about sex, dating and lingerie. Her daughters would be floored if they heard the routine.

"It's not very mom-ish," she says.

But mom-ish isn't the goal.

"Seven minutes of funny" -- that's the goal, as Bill Bushart, a professional comedian, describes it.

Bushart is Trost's stand-up comedy teacher. For six weeks, Trost and three others are studying under Bushart how to make audiences laugh. The course costs \$175. They'll perform Monday night at Joey's Comedy Club as part of their graduation.

Bushart, 39, has been teaching these classes for three years. He's a regular on the Midwest comedy circuit, performing at clubs in Royal Oak, Toledo and Madison, Wis. (See his club dates at www.billbushart.com).

His students have included nurses, plumbers, mall clerks and business professionals. The classes aren't likely to hatch the next comedy star.

"I'm not making a Jerry Seinfeld," Bushart says. "I'm making a Jerry Leibowitz."

Jerry Who?

"Exactly," Bushart says.

Most of his students are simply trying to push themselves to do something different. Call it an unorthodox class on public speaking -- Dale Carnegie meets open mic night.

"It's a mountain they're climbing," Bushart says.

On this Monday evening, Trost and her classmates are working through their routines. They have one more class before their graduation performance.

They're supposed to invite friends and family to that performance. Trost says her daughters -- Amy, 22, and Megan, 20 -- likely won't make the show.

Since her divorce in 2003, her daughters have been supportive, but they're adjusting to a mom who dates and wears low-rider jeans. Sex jokes wouldn't go over well.

"They're not ready," Trost says. "They're really not."

The ambivalence is understandable. For many of the students, a comedy class pushes them uncomfortably out of character. Participants often drop out.

Trost's class is no different.

At the start of this session, Bushart announces one of their classmates has quit. Most people are surprised at the time and effort required to develop a short comedy routine.

"You really have to work," Bushart says. "You have to search yourself to see if you have all the skills it takes."

Being a good comedian requires confidence, persistence and creativity, Bushart says. You have to write a lot of material to get a few jokes worth keeping. And you have to be prepared for failure.

"It's like being a pitcher in baseball," he says. "You have good outings and bad outings."

In his comedy classes, he wastes little time getting students into the spotlight and the comedy game. Tall and thin with a swagger on stage, Bushart is a drill sergeant with a supportive laugh and smart-aleck mouth.

"Get up there," he barks this evening from the front of the room.

"*You -- Mr. Puscas,*" he adds, when no one moves, propelling Bud Puscas, 44, a cell phone sales executive, from his seat to the stage.

For the next hour and a half, the students take turns doing their bits. Before the final session is over, they'll have heard each other's jokes at least a dozen times.

Even a joke that draws a boisterous laugh the first time will produce just a faint smile on subsequent tries. The jokes hit a wide range of topics: hemorrhoids, religion, dodgeball and dating.

Puscas does a bit about the side effects of erectile dysfunction drugs. Saturday nights could be busy in the emergency room, he says.

"The nurses are going to be back there playing ring toss," Puscas says.

Don Egyed, 52 and a colleague of Puscas' in the cell phone sales business, takes the stage next. This session, he's still working through his routine, muddling through bits on Catholicism and current events.

By the next week, though, the routine is coming together. He nails a joke about Michael Jackson.

"He's getting audited by the IRS," Egyed says of Jackson. "He claims 47 dependents: two kids and 45 accusers."

Bushart loves the Jackson joke. Throughout the sessions, he'll stop the students, telling them when they've hit a home run and giving pointers on how to get better.

"It's all about editing," he tells them.

"You have too many words."

"Get to the funny."

"Take control of the room."

"This doesn't come easy."

"Take a deep breath and realize: You're here to have fun."

In between turns, the students scribble notes, honing their acts and adding new punch lines.

Trost, neat and organized, types her routine on a laptop computer. On this evening, she gets advice from Laura Lou, a Livonia comedian who has dropped in to help Bushart.

Lou has suggestions for a part in Trost's routine that involves naming the kissing styles of men.

"I think you have to be more descriptive," Lou says. "I'm thinking everyday products in our society."

A few minutes later, Bushart is calling Trost's turn.

"All right, Janet," he says. "Get up there."

Being in front of an audience isn't scary for Trost. As a social worker and manager, she has led parenting classes and agency workshops. But coming up with material that makes people laugh is tough.

"That's the struggle," Trost says. "Either it comes or it doesn't. Sometimes, I feel stuck."

A struggle is what Trost wanted. She signed up for the class as what she calls a personal stretch.

For most of her life, she admits, she has taken the safe route. She grew up in Garden City the third of six children, went to college at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, landed a job in social work and got married in her 20s.

After the divorce a year and half ago, Trost started taking chances. She went dog sledding in northern Michigan. She took a trip to Europe and tried online dating.

In February, she was talking with a friend about her dating experiences. Trost and her friend thought it would make a great comedy skit. The next week, she called about the comedy class.

"I've gotten to the place where I just do it," Trost says. "I just don't think about it."

As Trost takes the stage in the comedy class, she quickly reveals this change in nature -- the good girl branching out.

"I decided I needed to get in touch with my inner bad girl," she tells the audience of classmates and instructors.

Much of the routine is an exaggeration of her real life. Bushart encourages the students to stretch the truth. It's a common comedic convention.

Trost talks about dating a younger man and setting an online trap for her ex-husband.

"I've been having an Internet affair with my ex-husband," she says. "I'm pretending to be a 28-year-old lingerie model. I forward all the e-mails he sends me to his new wife."

She continues the dating theme with the bit on kissing. "You have to kiss a lot of frogs to meet a prince," she says, pausing for a moment. "I didn't know they meant

F-R-O-G: fat, rich, old guys."

Trost wraps up the routine with a song set to the tune of "Home on the Range." In Trost's version, it's not the deer and the

antelope that are playing. Let's just say she crafts a few racy lines about what she's looking for in a man.

The song would make her daughters blush. But it draws a big laugh from Bushart and her classmates.

"That song is going to bring the house down," Bushart says. "Trust me, you're going to get laughs."

The feedback makes her proud. She never would have done that song a few years ago. She would have made up the words, but not sung it in front of an audience.

"In the past, people probably would have never said 'Janet is funny,' " Trost says. "They would have said 'Janet is nice.' "

On Monday night, at Joey's Comedy Club, she'll have seven minutes to change their minds.

Get ready, Bushart cautions Trost and the other students.

"The biggest thrill is when you get that first laugh and that first big laugh," he says. "I get goose bumps just thinking about it."

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