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But Seriously, Folks ... Former TSA Athlete Takes Comedy to the Classroom

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Burlington — Almost every type of standup humor had been attempted on the Vermont Comedy Club's stage by the time Harvey Kelley sauntered to its microphone the evening of Jan. 10. The college freshman and Sharon Academy graduate was 13th in a randomly selected order of 19 open mic performers and one of the youngest among them.

The night's opening performer talked about a friend's pet bunny dying on the operating table. The bit bombed so thoroughly that it was repeatedly referred to by those who followed.

A heavysset Canadian jokester operating under the name of Maxime Poutine wore a Hawaiian shirt, rumpled khaki pants and a fishing hat and wielded a ventriloquist's dummy resembling a Muppet.

A woman in a floral print house dress, a kerchief over her hair and a lone roller in her bangs, droned on in an alleged Vermont accent.

A man who gave his name as Karl laughed harder at his jokes than any of the roughly 40 audience members seated at small, round tables in the darkened theater space.

When Kelley's turn came, he told the gathering: "I've been told I'm a catch because my blood type is O negative. I'm a universal donor, baby. I can give you what you need, but only if you're hemorrhaging and ready to die."

After informing the audience that he's a comedic arts major at Boston's Emerson College, Kelley then confused and disquieted at least some of them with a rambling anecdote about how he was bullied as a kid because his peers thought he was Jewish and would demand he pick coins off the ground. But he rallied with his next lines.

"Sometime in the future, when my kid points to my degree on the wall and asks, 'Papa, what's that?' " Kelley said. "I'll look down ... and tousle his hair ... and I'll say. 'That's why we live in this van behind Kmart, son.' "

That one drew some genuine laughs. The lanky youngster's closing quip about masturbation in his dorm suite's shower felt gratuitous, but he beat the 4-minute time limit and hopped off stage to healthy applause. Not a bad stint overall, one of his Emerson professors said, when given a review over the phone.

"If I went on for that long with all new material and had one joke that worked, that would be a success," said Michael Bent, a veteran standup and television comic who's also a comedy consultant for Warner Brothers. "You also have to be willing to experiment and, unfortunately, it's going to happen onstage."

Kelley said he was so disruptive during second grade that his teacher, in an attempt to satisfy his need for attention, scheduled regular times for him to stand in front of the class and perform off the cuff.

"I was very hyperactive, but people told me I was a funny person and laughed during conversations," said Kelley, who did some standup routines as a Sharon Academy sophomore before making his public debut at the Vermont Comedy Club as a junior. "I wanted to find out if I could be objectively funny in front of strangers."

Kelley is the grandson of late Dartmouth College athletic trainer Fred Kelley, a onetime standout athlete who was known for his frequent laughter and for inspiring it in others. Both characteristics seem to have been passed on, for Harvey was a standout on Sharon's soccer, basketball and ultimate Frisbee teams.

Kelley earned senior honors in the first two sports and landed the lead in last year's performance of the comic opera *Pirates of Penzance* at his school. He said the need for focus and to calm one's nerves on the sports field and in the theater have helped him relax while performing standup.

"There were kids who were more outspoken or goofier, so he wasn't necessarily the team clown," said Sharon coach and athletic director Blake Fabrikant, himself something of a wit. "But he has a dry sense of humor, and he's very smart and cutting."

"There's a charm to him, but he's also one of the hardest workers I've ever known."

So many high school students just want to blend in, but Kelley was confident enough to grow out his curly hair and don a head sweatband while on the Phoenix's basketball team. Kelley resembled comedy movie star Will Farrell in his turn as Jackie Moon in the basketball film *Semi-Pro*. Sharon had a play ending with a Kelley shot, which it code-named "Moon."

Kelley was a high school junior and at a college fair when he paged through an Emerson course guide and noticed its comedic arts major, which he'd never heard of. He'd thought that subject was just a hobby.

Kelley visited Emerson as a high school senior and asked concerned questions of one of the comedic arts majors he met. Were the courses legitimate and challenging? Were they preparing him for a job or was he just wasting time and having fun? Kelley liked the answers he heard and, upon leaving a comedy class he'd sat in on, waved to the students and instructor and said he'd see them next year.

"If I had a child and they wanted to go to an expensive city school to study that, I'd probably ask them to think it through a little more," Kelley said with a laugh. "But my parents were just happy that I was excited to study and learn more in college."

Said his mother, Sperry Wilson: "What do you say when your child comes to you and he's passionate about what he wants to do? I'm not willing to crush a dream like that. If he didn't know how to work hard and he hadn't always had good grades, that would be a different story.

"I want him to be brave enough to say, 'What do I have to lose?'"

Kelley has discovered that he's constantly writing and rewriting at Emerson, much of it outside of class: jokes, monologues, sketch routines, scripts for short films. So far, he's studied how comedy's been used in stage plays throughout history and the fundamentals of comedic storytelling. Because he earned better than a C average in his high school math classes, he doesn't have to take any at Emerson.

"It's not incredibly academically rigorous, so I have a lot of time to work on what I want to," said Kelley, who's hoping to earn sought-after entry into one of the college's student comedy troupes as a sophomore. "It's inspiring when you're surrounded by people dedicated to achieving the same goal. It makes me think I should be doing better and writing more. It gets me excited to perform and show people what I can do."

Juniors and seniors in Kelley's major can spend time on an Emerson campus near Los Angeles' fabled Sunset Boulevard. Internships can be arranged and students learn how to punch up movie scripts, work with a wide variety of media and study how comedy fits into advertising.

For now, Kelley is starting on the ground floor. That's primarily standup, because short slots are available during campus shows and ones in Boston bars and clubs. He's hoping to perform as often as four times a week this winter and spring.

Bent, an Emerson graduate, encourages his students to learn while in the audience as well as while onstage.

"Be very critical, and then you're not going to make those mistakes yourself," the professor said. "The quicker you can set your standards, the better off you're going to be."

Bent said Kelley has shown early signs of having what it takes. The freshman showed up in class on Halloween dressed as Napoleon Dynamite from the 2004 hit movie of the same name and had the title character's mannerisms down pat.

"He has a very unique voice, and he's not unsure about what he thinks is money," Bent said. "That confidence is rare at that age, and he has it in spades."

Fabrikant also believes in his onetime pupil. Sharon Academy overflows with talented kids, but few combine Kelley's gifts with his drive, preternatural maturity and leadership. His wry take on what happens around him has always caused Fabrikant to chuckle.

"He has great observational humor, and a lot of comedy is rooted in philosophy and how absurd everyday life is," Fabrikant said. "What he's doing doesn't surprise me. I always figured he'd want to command attention."

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