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Jewish Home resident Daniel Oken shares his comedy routine with facilitator Mick Laugs.

Did You Hear The One About...?



Eddie Sadewitz appreciates her fellow Jewish Home residents' comedic comebacks.

“Sarah Cohen, how are ya?” belts out Lisa Geduldig. It is a greeting that is both welcoming and somehow sets the stage for an hour-and-a-half of “making fools of ourselves,” according to Jewish Home resident Rudy Hooremans.

This is the Esther Weintraub Comedy Clinic that takes place each Tuesday at the Jewish Home. Geduldig, the San Francisco comic who created Kung Pao Kosher Comedy and other comedy shows, originated the clinic to engage Jewish Home residents in an activity that enhances their quality of life by providing laughter, community, and self-expression.

And laughter there certainly is, as the group of nine to 12 comedy clinic regulars clown around – playing with language, using ordinary items such as a notebook or chalk eraser in extraordinary ways, or more importantly, their imaginations.

“This isn’t entertainment; there are no spectators,” explains Mick Laugs, the group’s facilitator. “Everyone is equally vulnerable. We call it a ‘clinic’ because it’s healing. It’s amazing what happens each week.” >>>

“We act like crazy nuts,” says resident Edie Sadewitz.

“It makes me feel like we’re still funny and still young,” offers Sarah Cohen.

Laugs begins the group quietly, with an exercise designed to separate the participants from their daily routines and loosen them up. “Close your eyes ... Exhale ... Make a sound like you’re letting air out of a tire ... Now gurgle,” Laugs instructs them.

After a round of using one word to describe how they are feeling (examples include wonderful, splendid, fantabulous, asparagus, Thursday-ish, fluttery, and heady), Laugs tells the group it is time to talk gibberish.

Each takes a turn. Francine Hament punctuates her gibberish with expansive gestures. Rudy Hooremans’ sounds a lot like French.

The various routines, which at times involve pairing

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up, take place in a circle, with participants seated, some in their wheelchairs. It is a drop-in class, and although there are regular attendees, everyone is welcome.

There may be schticks Laugs cannot direct due to the residents’ limitations. “Sometimes people can’t hear, or they’re not feeling great, so we work with or around that. It’s organic,” he explains. “When one of our regular members died, the group was quite distressed. He was a beautiful, spiritual man and we really missed him, so we shared how he affected each of our lives.”

Mollie Spirn weaves a tall tale around Post-its for comedy clinic originator Lisa Geduldig.



Rudy Hooremans and Francine Hament do improv.

The clinic developed as a result of the friendship between Geduldig and the late Esther Weintraub, a Jewish Home resident and stand-up comedienne who performed in *Funny Girlz*, one of Geduldig’s shows.

Laugs and Moshe Cohen, a professional clown who also serves as a comedy clinic facilitator, encourage spontaneity and expression.

“You surprise yourself with what comes out,” remarks Edie Sadewitz. “Mark is the king of surprises,” she says about resident Mark Steiner.

Noting he tried stand-up comedy once in a North Bay club and found it “scary,” Mark Steiner admits, “In the clinic it’s easy to do. I haven’t figured out why. Maybe because you live with everyone here. They’re your neighbors, your family.”

Whatever the reason, the comedy clinic works. Residents leave each week with a sense of learning something, making new social connections or cementing relationships, and perhaps most significantly, forgetting what ails them for 90 minutes as they laugh their heads off.

“There is excellent evidence that laughter makes you healthier,” says Dr. Jay Luxenberg, the Jewish Home’s director of Medical Services. “We are always looking at innovative methods to minimize the use of medications. The Home is one of the very few skilled nursing facilities in the country to offer such a program. The comedy clinic not only provides a way for our resident participants to feel better, but it helps them recharge their immune systems.”

The comedy clinic bears out the maxim, ‘laughter is the best medicine.’ But, as we know, medicine costs money. The Home is looking for generous donors to sustain its weekly injections of humor on an ongoing basis. For further information on the comedy clinic and how you may help, please contact Mark Denton, the Home’s director of Development, at 415.469.2323. ■