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COMEDY 101

In which the AJC's Kathy Janich (right) and her stand-up classmates face the challenge of the steel monster and their own private demons

By [KATHY JANICH](#)



BARRY WILLIAMS / Special

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COMEDY WEB SITES

www.jeffjustice.com Details on all his activities including Comedy Workshoppes.

www.kidkomey.com: Similar resource for kid comedians. Kid Komey Foundation wants to give kids from all walks of life a chance to express themselves through humor.

www.thepunchline.com: Funny stuff, what comics are coming to town, open-mike nights, Comedy Workshope details.

www.comedy-zone.net: Great resource for all things funny, links to resources and comedian web sites.

comedy.com: Warehouse-type site for funny people, places, things and a joke of the day.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

A salesman, a writer and a wireless wholesaler walk into a stand-up comedy class and learn they won't be writing any jokes that start like that.

No rabbi, no priest, no entering-a-bar schlock, says The Man, aka instructor Jeff Justice, brandishing a smile somewhat obstructed by a Fuller brush mustache.

In six weeks, Justice will nudge this class of Seinfeld wannabes toward the stage at the Punchline comedy club, preparing us to get up there alone and do four minutes of jokes we've written ourselves. We'll face personal demons -- and almost 300 invited guests -- digging deep into our psyches and risking very . . . public . . . humiliation.

"Basically," Justice says, with a he-he-he, "you're sitting there now hoping no one else is funnier than you."

Yes, Jeff. Yes, we are.

We are strangers on this clammy October night -- nine men, eight women -- squeezing funny bone to funny bone in a shoe box-size conference room at a Microtel on a shank of road between Buford Highway and I-85, between a boarded-up Denny's and the Pink Pony strip club.

Food plant supervisor Tim Pazdro, 41, is here. So is ad exec Gail Tassell, 41, and UPS driver Randal Daniel, "38 years ugly." Number cruncher Geni Whitehouse, 43, is back for a second time.

Wireless whiz Tim Yeager sits up front, still and silent, his leather jacket perfuming the hotbox. Nearby is Jack Warren of Clemson, S.C., who, driven by his dreams and a '94 Ford Escort, spent 2 1/2 hours on the road to get here.

I'm here, too. An experienced journalist immersed in my own little pool of self-doubt. I signed up for Jeff Justice's Comedy Workshoppe for several reasons, none of which seem so good right now: I'd been told once too often that I'm "funny" and "ought to be onstage"; I've bought into the belief that if something excites *and* frightens you, you must do it; and, since part of me has always wanted to do this, and the paper's paying my way, I figure I've had enough therapy to get through it.

I don't know what we expect, exactly, but what we get feels more like a brain-busting boot camp than your standard listen-and-learn class.

It's first things first this first night. That means facing the steel monster at the head of the class. Looming, cold, taunting.

The microphone.

"Enter stage right, make eye contact with your audience and s-m-i-l-e," Justice tells us, in a tone meant to be encouraging. "C'mon, folks, this isn't surgery."

We're to grab the stand firmly with our left hand, pull the mike out with our right and put the stand behind us without breaking eye contact. Then we say our name, what we do for a living and why we're in this mess, eh, class.

I pray to go later rather than sooner and repeat to myself, "This isn't surgery, this isn't surgery, this isn't surgery."

It looks a lot easier on TV.

If we avoid eye contact, we start over. Ditto if we mix up our rights and lefts, step away from the "audience" not toward it, or fail to speak loudly or clearly or slowly enough.

The videotape is rolling, and we won't sit down until Justice is satisfied. More or less. When Yeager steps up, we see a confident 32-year-old. A guy who three years earlier swapped work at the Chicago Board of Trade to go wireless in Atlanta. He's an ex-jock. Played football at Ohio's Ashland University. Probably still spends time in the weight room. He can't possibly frighten easily. Right?

Limbs quaking, voice shaking, Yeager says, "Well, I pretty much have a phobia . . ."

Justice interrupts: "If you really had a phobia you wouldn't have gotten in that door tonight."

Yeager smiles, not quite buying it. "OK, let's just say I'm very nervous about speaking in front of people."

He's here only because he left himself no out. He's not one to waste money, and Justice gives absolutely no refunds. So when Yeager signed up, he paid up. ASAP. He's in, for better or worse, and telling himself, "I'm going to do something about this fear. . . . I'm going to jump up onstage. . . . It's baptism by fire."

Fire, indeed. In the heat of this weekly crucible, Justice will talk and we will listen. We will write and he will rewrite. He will drill us on types of jokes, on shaping jokes, on brainstorming jokes, on what makes something funny, on what makes it funnier, on how to dig through our personal lives for ideas, details, toppers, setups, punch lines and tags.

Fear nibbles, but Justice already urges us to start inviting friends and family to graduation. (We're not even sure we'll live till then.) He tries to apply some salve. "Graduation," he says, "is guaranteed to be the highlight of your life."

Uh-huh.

Showbiz dream

Jack Warren doesn't plan to stop at graduation. Doing stand-up for a living has been his dream since he was a smart-alecky kid growing up Catholic near Kalamazoo, Mich.

The Circuit City salesman is one of the few here with any comedy experience whatsoever, even if it's just a couple of open-mike gigs. Still, he doesn't seem much funnier than the rest of us. And he notices that.

"The second week nobody laughed," he says. "And I went home thinking, 'Maybe this is something I *can't* do.' And I just had to resolve to work harder. The third week I got laughs, and I thought, 'Well, if I work at it, I can definitely do it.'"

Warren, a slouchy 5-feet-8 with a sharp wit and a hairline in reverse, wants to achieve what few have. For every Sinbad and Garry Shandling who makes comedy pay, there are untold numbers of Jack Warrens who come up short. It's always been that way.

He's decided that to get *there* he first needs to be *here*, even though he's already mastered technique No. 2, "Mike in Stand": Grasp stand firmly in your left hand. Twist its knob

counterclockwise to loosen (lefty loosey) and adjust height. Twist knob clockwise to tighten (righty tighty). Then leave it alone! Don't lose eye contact! Don't stop talking! Don't step backward!

Wanna try that again?

This funny business is tough. Always has been.

The do's and don'ts we're trying to perfect are rooted in the vaudeville of Milton Berle and Henny Youngman; the radio days of Jack Benny, and Burns and Allen; and the 1950s-60s Borscht Belt humor of Alan King and Jackie Mason.

Their stand-up -- the stand-up of "Take my wife, please!" -- turned toward "expletive deleted" in the '50s with the often profane Lenny Bruce, political satirist Mort Sahl and social critic Dick Gregory. "I grew up believing comedy had certain rules," George Carlin says in "Comic Insights" by Franklyn Ajaye (Silman-James Press, 2002, \$18.95), "and Lenny showed that there are no rules."

Oh, but there are for newcomers like us. Justice has lots of them:

"You lose your audience after 18 words."

"You cannot please everybody."

"Stay away from racist jokes. Religious jokes, especially in the South. Stereotypes, unless it's yours. Disease, unless you have it."

"In comedy, unlike love, shorter is always better."

"Be yourself."

"Be vulnerable."

"There's nothing funnier than the truth, if the truth's funny."

"As a comedian, you have a right to lie."

"Just go out there and have fun."

Uh-huh.

Certified laugh leader

Justice, 51, is coach, cheerleader, huckster, performer and his own king of comedy with a supersized McHumor empire that began with a magic act in 1980, segued into stand-up and grew empirically when he realized that "funny" plus "business" meant sleeping in his own bed at night while laughing for a living.

"I can make as much money on one 45-minute keynote presentation as on six weeks of class with every spot taken," he says. A full class, 20 students, gets him \$4,980.

A dogged self-promoter, Justice is part of the National Speakers Bureau and a certified laugh leader for something called the World Laughter Tour. He teaches two levels of stand-up classes;

does private coaching; writes keynote speeches; emcees awards banquets and teaches humor workshops for suit 'n' tie types. He shelved the stand-up in '94 to grow his business but puts his shtick and one of eight beloved Hawaiian shirts back on for Workshoppe graduations.

"It's such a great experience," he says of the Workshoppe, "getting to know everybody and watching them grow. It's incredible."

"Incredible" and "great" aren't the words on the tips of our tongues most Mondays. It's more like, "Hello, sweat" and "So long, saliva."

But we learn. How to handle hecklers, for one. How to shape our material ("Start big and finish bigger"), when to use accents and voices and physical humor. How to look inside ourselves to find the funny.

Justice has an exercise he calls "The Twenty Statements of Truth." To me, it's more like using your pain to entertain.

First we list 20 or more facts about ourselves (hurtful, honest, funny, peculiar, depressing, embarrassing). Then we write punch lines for as many of those facts as possible.

Here's one of mine: "I love to sleep. I'd do it for a living if I could."

"Punched" up it becomes: "If I could, I'd sleep for a living. The tough part is finding the right position."

That becomes the seventh setup and punch line in my final routine.

By Week 4, the pain at the Comedy Sweatshoppe has thinned our group to 14. By Week 5, thoughts of fame barely crease our cerebrums, but the "G"-word does. Graduation is but 15 days away.

It's time to put our routines out for all to see. My coping technique: Start as slowly and calmly as possible, then accelerate -- deftly, I believe -- racing imperceptibly for the finish and the safety of my chair.

Justice: "Did you know you speeded up as you went along?"

Me: "I did that on purpose so I could sit down sooner."

Justice: "Try it again . . . a little . . . slower."

Me, to myself: "\$#!%*!"

We now have just three or four days to whip our words into shape and memorize them before performing without a script at a daylong rehearsal over the weekend. We scurry to set up practice sessions. We rewrite, rehearse, offer gentle feedback and bond.

It takes all I've got at the first practice just to read my stuff out loud. I'm better at the second, trying it over and over again but frustrated by the tone and ease that elude me. The delivery bedevils me.

At the third session, on Graduation Eve, I'm more confident in an uncertain way. I know how I want to sound, I can hear it in my head. I just can't get my voice to cooperate.

Still, I'm in a better place than Warren. In Clemson, 130 miles away, he's on his own, running his lines, rehearsing inflections, negotiating his nerves solo, sans classmates.

Yeager skips most of these mini-tutorials, drilling instead with his wife, CNN Headline News anchor Robin Meade, his sounding board since the day he signed his safety away.

"Basically, he took it upon himself to volunteer for 'torture,' " she says. "As [graduation] got closer, I could see him sweat."

She prods him to practice; to use the mike plugged into their piano. Tells him that his best, no matter what that is, will be a huge achievement. The day before graduation, she suggests he run through his act 30, maybe 40 times. He manages 12.

She's invested; he is, after all, opening with riffs on their relationship.

Meade: "I was the butt of his jokes."

Yeager: "No, *my* butt was the butt of my jokes."

More on that later.

These people, as strange as Martians just a few weeks earlier, are my newest best friends. We're like soldiers going to battle. Together we'll face the "G"-force and Mr. Microphone. And despite the most careful preparation and attention to attire, we'll be performing up there, well, essentially naked.

Says Justice: "You're doing what less than 1/10th of 1/100th of the people in the world do."

Uh-huh.

To kill or bomb

Nov. 26, 2002, a night we thought -- sometimes hoped -- would never come. Still, whether we killed or bombed, it'd be over.

As dusk drops in and the real, live paying customers line up out front, we hit the back door of the Punchline one by one. We tiptoe gingerly through the kitchen and into the long, lean club, physically empty but filled with the aroma of beer.

We chat. Brightly. Nervously. We practice "Microphone 101" and "Mike in Stand." We quiver. Justice finally shows up and hands out the lineup cards. Kermit, *ribbit*, Rolison, a 61-year-old retiree with a bourbon basso, goes first. I'm sixth. Warren is 12th. The best, usually saved for last, is . . . Yeager.

My spot comes more quickly than I expect -- legs going to rubber, stomach souring -- as Nos. 1-5 get on and off to hoots and hollers.

Backstage, I breathe. Deeply. And tell myself, "Seize the moment." It's a cliché, I know, but it works.

I had never been conscious, never comfortable doing the routine in class or in practice. Now, squinting at the lights and the heads bobbing before me, I slow down and enjoy it.

At 5-foot-1 and more poundage than I care to admit here, I've sculpted a routine around height and weight and a few other fun foibles. I come onstage waving, smiling *and making eye contact*. I fumble with the mike, as usual, and, as I put the stand behind me, say:

"Can you see me now?" (Good, robust laughter.)

Then: "Did you notice how I came out here tonight? Hand high, waving?" (Pause). "That was so I'd look taller . . . and thinner. . . . I think it's working for me." (Laughter erupts again!)

Excited, not nervous, I'm aware of everything around me. My ad-libs. The facial expressions in the crowd. Actual applause.

I hold for the laughs, then continue: "Wanna know my favorite cookie . . . ?

". . . thin mints."

A few minutes later *I wind up, bow, breathe and escape, making my way through the crowd and back to my table. A woman grabs me in the dark and whispers: "I just wanted to shake your hand before I see you on national TV." Honest! It couldn't have gone better.*

When Warren takes the stage, his microphone technique is flawless, his nervousness noticeable only to those of us who know him. He talks of college, a wild time of drinking, drugs and sexual experimentation.

"I, myself, experimented with celibacy for a while," he says. "It's tough to hide that from your friends and family. The shame of such an alternative lifestyle."

The show's about 75 minutes old when Yeager's turn comes up. He's in suede and striding confidently.

He talks about his missus (shopping with her, their wedding night, who's really in charge), then wades into Part 2 of his act: What it's like when a guy gets his first post-30 physical.

From somewhere deep inside, this self-proclaimed near-phobic finds the nerve to pantomime dropping his pants and bending over an examination table.

He continues, in the squeaky voice of a little old lady doctor who could be Dr. Ruth's American cousin.

"OK, Mr. Yeager," she says. "Drop your shorts. Let's see what you have under the hood."

"Oh, a one-cylinder! Isn't he a cutie?"

Adrenaline rush

"I was extremely nervous when I walked out," Yeager recalls later. "Then all of sudden -- I think it was after my second punch line -- I felt like I was standing 5 feet behind me and watching myself. It felt so bizarre. After that second punch line, something kicked in, and I had this huge rush of adrenaline and clarity. It was like, 'I'm here, and this is cool. I'm doing this!' "

It's been 12 weeks since our big night; in fact the next edition of Jeff Justice's Comedy Workshoppe graduates Tuesday.

Yeager's back at the wireless biz and, like me, says he doubts he'll do stand-up again. Why risk tainting the memory, we agree. Warren, however, is going for it.

He quit Circuit City and joined up with comic Chris "Moo Moo" Phillips for one-nighters in places like Valdosta, Waycross and Albany. On March 23, he'll get a few minutes before Moo Moo's set at the Funny Farm in Roswell.

Of Justice's 1,100-plus Workshoppe grads, 200 have quit the 9-to-5 for a crack at the laugh track. In 12 years, only a dozen or so have made some money, nothing approaching Leno-esque, or even Jeff Justice-like, proportions.

Co-workers still ask me when I'll be doing stand-up again or why I didn't invite them to graduation.

My answers are honest: "Never, probably" and "If I had known how well it would go, I would have."

I'm satisfied with the leap in my self-confidence and certifiable evidence that I'm funny. I've got a Jeff Justice Comedy Workshoppe diploma to prove it.

"She has stretched herself to her limits," it says, "and dug deep into her life to dredge up four minutes of great jokes. She is now ready to take the stage of life and make 'em laugh."

Uh-huh.

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