

Spotlight On ...Joel Zeff

Comic Belief by Amanda Keys

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When was the last time you yelled “Ta-da!” when you accomplished something at work or made funny faces at your co-workers? If it has been a long time, Joel Zeff can fix that for you.

Zeff, a Lake Highlands resident, has worked in many corporate atmospheres through the years, including a stint as a reporter at the now-defunct Dallas Times Herald.

But it was in his role as a member of the Ad-Libs improvisational comedy troupe that he often felt most effective.

“The best thing you can do with someone is to laugh,” Zeff says. “It’s the best way to build a bond.”

So in 1994, Zeff combined that belief with his personal knowledge that the corporate world was often less-than-amusing and formed Joel Zeff Creative. He now works as a public speaker.

“I saw a natural common thread between improv and qualities my clients wanted employees to have,” says Zeff, who has also acted in a number of commercials. Those qualities include positive support, clear communication, connections with others, creativity and, of course, a sense of humor.

“Improv has a great message. The skills are amazing and apply to any work environment.”

The main goal of Zeff’s speaking engagements is to “no matter what...laugh and have fun. Then the audience listens, understands and participates more,” he says.

Zeff uses 25 different exercises, depending on the size of his audience. For example, at a presentation for Sprint call center employees, Zeff selected two employees to control all of his and another employee’s movements as they acted out digging a ditch. The exercise gets a laugh from the audience, he says, but also shows that sometimes people have to depend on one another, practice compromise and let others take initiative.

Jon Carlson, director of customer service at Sprint, hired Zeff.

“I thought he did a very nice job,” Carlson says. “He was funny and entertaining, and also had a good message of support and communication.”

Zeff, who still occasionally performs with the Ad-Libs troupe, says when he first started speaking, he didn’t realize it would become his whole business. However, word-of-mouth spread, and he soon found himself with more and more engagements.

Now, he estimates that with Joel Zeff Creative, he does approximately 100-125 speeches and workshops per year, with an extensive clientele list.

Patrick Grady, director of strategic events at Radio Shack, has hired Zeff several times to give presentations.

“Joel is outstanding. He has the unique ability to connect with his audience, to engage their minds and challenge their tired old beliefs about communication,” Grady says.