



MARGIE BOULÉ

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For leader of this club, everything is a laughing matter

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All kinds of people have fancy credentials, but Gail Hand has a skill not many can claim. She's a Certified Laughter Leader.

"I went to an actual training and learned about the benefits of therapeutic laughter," says the 43-year-old Portlander.

Gail shares her knowledge with folks who attend the Laughter Clubs she's started here in Portland. Twice a month people gather at the CoHo Theatre to laugh. Gail also leads Laughter Clubs at some local retirement centers.

Gail learned a lot when she was training in therapeutic laughter, but she didn't learn how to be funny. Gail already had that down.

"My grandmother had a great sense of humor," Gail says. "She was very ill most of her life. But she was very funny. You'd say, 'Grandma, how are you feeling?' and she'd say, 'My shoulder is weak, my heart is bothering me and when are you getting married?' and make me laugh."

When Gail was still young, it was clear she had inherited her grandmother's sense of humor. Gail says humor was a lifesaver in a family coping with health problems, mental illness, alcoholism and other challenges.

Gail was in her 20s in San Francisco, working a corporate job, when a friend dared her to try stand-up comedy. She took the dare. "I wrote 10 jokes, and they laughed at seven," Gail says. "I figured that was a good success rate, so I went back."

Gail was a stand-up comic full time for about five years but got tired of the income ups and downs. She went back to corporate life, and took her humor with her. She was a more successful salesperson "because I was funny," she says.

Today Gail pays the bills speaking to companies and at colleges across the country about humor, leadership and diversity.

But what she does here at home, in Portland, is her "public service work," done on a nonprofit basis. She teaches people how to laugh.

It all started when she discovered the World Laughter Tour. "It's an organization started in India by Dr. Madan Kataria," Gail says. A sort of Indian Patch Adams, Kataria "is a doctor who prescribes not just medicine, but laughter-yoga type exercises for his patients."

Gail leads people in a series of "simulated laughter exercises," she says, that make people start laughing for real. "It's kind of 'fake it till you make it,'" she says.

Gail also belongs to the Association for Applied Therapeutic Humor, or AATH. "It's a clearinghouse for doctors, nurses, therapists, speakers and clowns, who share cutting-edge information on why laughter is good for you: the most up-to-date brain research, therapeutic research, medical research on humor."

For example, Gail says scientific studies have determined laughter "can reduce blood pressure and heart rate, release endorphins which provide natural pain relief, relax your muscles throughout your body, help move nutrients and oxygen to your tissues," among other benefits. Some researchers say laughter can strengthen the immune system.

Gail has seen "mental, physical, and emotional benefits of laughter" in the seniors who attend her Laughter Clubs in retirement centers. She's not the only one.

"It's been a sellout," says Calvin Carter, who runs activity classes at Firwood Gardens, an assisted living center in Portland. "I've seen smiles on the faces of residents who normally just aren't smiling. I think she has the right idea. We just need to get it into some kind of mass production, to offer this to hundreds of places simultaneously."

Gail also runs an independent Laughter Club at the CoHoTheatre, 2257 N.W. Raleigh St., Portland, twice a month. Jo Randall, who lives in Portland, has attended every session. "They're so energizing," Jo says. "I come out of there feeling great. It's remarkable. There's nothing like being happy at the end of your day."

There's nothing like being happy all day long, according to Gail. "It's important to take humor breaks in your day," she says. "Find a laughter buddy."

Even in tough times, Gail says, laughter helps. "I think it's important to address your fears or your woes with laughter, with humor. I give people those tools if I can."

She's not suggesting you laugh in every situation. "Some things just aren't funny. But if we can't laugh now, maybe someday we will." Gail's favorite quote is " 'Comedy is tragedy plus time.' Carol Burnett said that. And it's true."

Even in crisis, "humor allows us to detach from trauma for a few moments and gives respite from the emotional chaos we all feel."

At the AATH annual conference recently, Gail realized her colleagues "have all had tragedies in their lives, and they discovered laughter and realized it could help. They really want to promote wellness through laughter."

Gail's next Laughter Club at the CoHo Theatre is 7 p.m. March 9. For more information, go to her Web site (www.gailhand.com). The public is welcome.

"Laughter is so good for our soul," Gail says, "to heal it, to replenish energy, or just to be joyous. My name, 'Gail,' means 'spread more joy' in Hebrew. I don't think there's any accident in that. I feel I'm doing what I was put on the Earth to do, share joy with people. And I'm really having a good time."

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