

## Who Knew Public Scholarship was so Fun(ny)?: Practical Applications Within and Beyond the Academy

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This essay examines the origins and initial objectives of the Comedy Club—an after school comic theatre program that develops an original sketch comedy show annually at Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School in Wheaton, Maryland—along with the value of university-middle school collaborations. Throughout, I document administrative issues, some associated with university collaborations and others endemic to the public school system and the impact this collaboration had on my own research and teaching at the University of Maryland, College Park. Employing a feminist ethnography as my method, this discussion draws from interviews, participant-observation methods, and first-hand involvement to examine how this program is efficacious for students, the school district, the university and community at large.

*Setting: A presidential debate is interrupted by the entrance of an audience member talking loudly on his cell phone*

Audience Member (Person 2): Could you, sir, please cease your infernal talking? It is interrupting and disrespecting this prestigious event.

Josh: Whoa, dude, does it look like I speak dork?

Audience Member (Person 2): Well I graduated from Harvard with a 3.5 GPA.

Josh: Well La-de-frickin-da. I graduated from E. Brooke Lee Middle School with a 3.8 GPA so HA! (Solomon & Solomon 9-10).<sup>1</sup>

**T**his short excerpt, written by two sisters, both now graduates of the Comedy Club, deals humorously with the person we have all come to recognize as that annoying-person-glued-to-their-cell-phone, who, incidentally, is later ejected from the presidential debate for his disruptive antics. It prompts the audience to laugh at a character we usually love to hate, providing a healthy catharsis from the annoyance and anger we inwardly harbor towards those who are disrespectful, lacking in civility, or downright rude. But no one is safe in Comedy Club, as evidenced by the fact that the Solomon sisters make the Harvard graduate an object of ridicule by having Josh compare his own, higher GPA, to that of another patron of the debate. We laugh because the comparison is ridiculous, because we are all taught to revere Ivy League institutions; but it also makes us (meaning the audience, the community that supports the Comedy Club) proud of Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School, because Josh is proud and we cannot help but get behind this person who is defending the honor of the school that these young people attend. In fact, when this sketch was presented at the school assemblies, the audience roared and cheered in response to Josh comparing his higher—albeit presumably less prestigious—GPA to that of a Harvard graduate. This is just one example of the many ways the Comedy Club builds community and instills pride in and among its participants, school staff, administrators, and parents. It is for this reason that the Comedy Club began in the first place.

## *Introduction*

**T**he Comedy Club is a unique after school activity, which develops an original sketch comedy show annually at Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School in Wheaton, Maryland. This program, currently in its thirteenth year, allows young people an opportunity to become the authors of their own lives and experiences by allowing them to write and perform sketch comedy. Additionally, students are encouraged to participate in the decision-making processes—from generating ideas for sketches to offering input on blocking choices, artistic rendering of set designs and character development decisions—and to learn strategies for using humor and parody to cope with life experiences. Each year, the program demonstrates its ability to provide a viable creative outlet in a community combating high rates of gang violence and to enlist young performers, writers, artists, and those interested in the technical aspects of putting on a professional stage production.

Recognizing the value of this program, the University of Maryland's Art Gliner Center for Humor Studies supported its growth and development for four years (2002-2006). This paper examines the origins and initial objectives of the Comedy Club, along with the value of this university-middle school collaboration—documenting administrative issues, some associated with this university collaboration and others endemic to the public school system—and the impact this collaboration had on my own research and teaching at the University of Maryland, College Park. Employing a feminist ethnography as my method, this discussion draws from interviews, participant-observation methods, and first-hand involvement to examine how this program is efficacious for students, the school district, the university, and the community at large.

To be clear, I am not making any claims to objectivity nor positing that all university-community partnerships will be riddled with precisely the same issues. Objectivist claims to “knowing” are, at the least, worrisome and, at the most, a violent misrepresentation and disservice towards the very persons we seek to understand; after all, identity is mutable and dynamic as is any creative process. I offer instead my experience with the program, spanning four years as Co-Director (2004-2008). This text should be read as a “polyphonic”<sup>2</sup> (Emerson 308) ethnography, a myriad of voices rising up, speaking out, and cracking jokes, all aimed at demonstrating the value of university-K-12 collaborations and the benefits of this particular university-middle school relationship that for four years fostered public scholarship—subsequently informing my own research and teaching. This collaboration also supported an incredible arts education program that, among other things, helps young people develop a comic sensibility, fosters intellectual and creative acumen, and provides a comedic space for young people to claim as their own, a place for them to find their own (funny) voice.

## *A Fun(ny) Kid Nation*

**T**hirteen years ago (in 1995), the principal at the time separately approached Harry Bagdasian and Lisa Levin Itte, both parents of middle school children and active in their local PTSA and community to see if has a background in community service and is also an educator who later went on to develop the Leadership Training Institute (LTI) at John F. Kennedy High School in Silver Spring, MD, an innovative

program that teaches students to develop leadership qualities and provides them access to leadership roles in the community and later on in college. Both were excellent candidates for the position, but the principal assumed only one of them would actually be interested, though she was not sure which one. When they both agreed to accept the position(s) it was a blessing for the students and for Harry and Lisa, neither of whom realized just how time consuming this endeavor would be. When asked why they took on this project, and their main goals in doing so, Lisa responded by saying: “We wanted the kids to have fun... basically we were really trying to develop the school community and we knew that parents came out to support the school and we knew kids felt better about their school if they had after school activities and specifically things like productions” (Bagdasian & Levin Itte Interview). Harry responded differently, though both were nodding vigorously while the other stated their intentions for accepting the position: “Very selfishly, one of the things I wanted to do was create a special program at my middle school because I was so tired of hearing about these magnet schools and special programs this and special programs that and personally I wanted to do something that was going to put Lee on the map,” he said with pride and a hint of defiance (Bagdasian & Levin Itte Interview).

The inception of the Comedy Club and their rationale for taking on the program were all influenced heavily by local school politics. Lisa and Harry were both active advocates of quality education and programs for their children, seldom missing an opportunity to voice their dissent or offer their praise, depending on what the situation called for. I recorded hours of conversation about the politics of magnet schools, the dissolution of redeemable academics in the face of falling property prices, and white-flight, or as Lisa called it, “affluent flight,” because this local exodus was characterized more by socio-economics than by race (Bagdasian & Levin Itte Interview). There were, she recalled, just as many, if not more families of color moving or pulling their kids out of public schools to place them in private institutions that were more academically reputable. Local conditions demanded active parental involvement, and Lisa and Harry were in the trenches of this bureaucratic warfare for nearly a decade. They saw numerous principals come and go, some chased out necessarily, one of whom Harry refused to call by name, instead referring to this principal in Potteresque vernacular as “She-who-cannot-be named.” Both were emphatic that the Comedy Club could not be divorced from local politics and that, in part, the Comedy Club is shaped by their position as agitators for their children, and for the local community. Harry Bagdasian explains: either one of them would be interested in handling the after school drama program, which no longer had an adult sponsor (usually an English teacher). Harry was well known in the community for being a published playwright who made, and continues to make his living from local and national theatre projects. Lisa

| ...after many years of trying to fight the system and making some inroads ....I  
 | realized that I could do more, have more direct effect on my community by  
 | running a really good program at the middle school... I want Lee to be on the  
 | map. I want people anywhere in Maryland when they hear of Lee Middle School,  
 | “oh wow they’re the ones, they create plays that are performed all around the  
 | world.” So in a way it’s kind of an egotistical thing...I want there to be  
 | something special in our community...(Bagdasian & Levin Itte Interview).

Their commitment to the community, to maintaining high standards of education for all kids, and to the artistic and creative development of young people coalesced in the inception of the Comedy Club in 1995.

One of the amazing parts of this program is its ability to unite students hailing from different age groups, social groups and with varying degrees of ability. People have long sought the adhesive that keeps communities of people rallying for a common cause, but “[d]ominant perspectives in modern social sciences as well as in media tend to interpret complex lives in very isolated and limited ways by attending to only a single dimension” (Weber 67). Recognizing that students will enter this program with varying skill sets and backgrounds that may be useful to the process, the Comedy Club accepts all interested students regardless of experience or ability and engages them in various aspects of production. According to Principal Mary Beth Waits (who retired in 2007), the Comedy Club is an after school activity that has a long history of involving students from diverse areas of the school’s population. Principal Waits:

| We have by percentage the highest number of special education students in our  
| school of any school in Montgomery County. And many of our GTLD<sup>3</sup> students  
| have been Comedy Club participants all three of the years they are here at Lee  
| and that is not only helping them with their academic skills because of the  
| writing and the speaking and performing but also their social skills, their  
| management skills (Waits Interview).

Sherry Chiasson, the mother of a Comedy Club student participant, corroborates the value of this program that accepts and appreciates *all* students and the positive effects this program has had in her own son’s life and others. She writes in an email: “Since 1995, the Comedy Club has involved students regardless of their abilities—or disabilities... Students’ growth and development is beyond compare. Students have a place to belong—and a place to shine. They feel GOOD about themselves” (Chiasson E-mail). It is promising to see a program like the Comedy Club that can house diversity—cultural, experiential, social, or otherwise—and still successfully speak to the issues important to most members of the Comedy Club like the pain of being ostracized or the fear of failure.

This after school program began and continues to flourish because its directors, school administrators, and parents believe that humor can be cathartic and positive, both physically and emotionally. The program’s ability to unite such disparate students groups—many of them coming from GT, LD or GTLD tracks in the school system—is in large part because it offers them a space to respond to the forces shaping *all of their lives* like peer pressure, the push to consume, bullies and snobs, political and cultural issues, the media and academic, administrative and familial demands. Regardless of race/ethnic, gender, class or sexual identity, these young people find common ground in shared experiences. My own convictions about the usefulness of arts education to enlist young people to act out and on their own life experiences is “grounded in the understanding that direct hands-on participation moves people more than anything else, enlarging their vision of possibility much more immediately than might be achieved through mere observation” (Goldbard 54). This practice is empowering, a tenet recently echoed by


another mother of one of the Comedy Club participants, who in an email credited this program with being a positive influence in her son's life saying: "It is no accident that my seriously dysgraphic son began writing for fun the summer after his first year with the Comedy Club. And does any school anywhere in the county have an extra-curricular activity that more organically or more smoothly unites students from both GT tracks and LD programs and brings about both social and performance equality?" (Hall E-mail). Her son is the author of two sketches in this year's show, is an incredible asset to the program, and is consistently relied upon to mentor younger participants.

When the Comedy Club convenes in late September, rehearsals are spent collecting information from the students. They are given five to six handouts that ask them questions such as "What causes disagreements in your home?;" "What's In/What's Out?;" "What's the most difficult thing about being your age?" and "What are things about your parents or siblings that drive you crazy?"<sup>4</sup> From their responses, we, Harry and myself, cull material that best represents the majority and is suitable for comedic reinterpretation, and use it as the basis for writing the show. During the first several years, co-founders Harry and Lisa generated sketches that they would bring to rehearsals to try out with the participants. If students did not like the sketch, citing it as not funny or a poor representation of their lives, the sketch was usually discarded and more sketches written until enough were successful to fill an hour and half long performance. In three of the past four years while I have been involved in the program, we have invited students interested in writing to join us for weekly writing workshops, from which we select student written sketches that comprise approximately half the show's content. From the beginning, student input was essential to the process. Even today, thirteen years later, time is set aside at the end of each rehearsal for an informal pow-wow among the students, high school aides, and staff to solicit feedback and suggestions about the sketches and for the show in general, ranging anywhere from props, casting, and blocking to character development.

This is one of many democratic and community-oriented processes modeled in the Comedy Club. Unfortunately, this process unintentionally excludes some Comedy Club participants because at four o'clock the activity buses take home students not having a parent able to provide transportation. This accounts for approximately 10% to 35% of the students, depending on the week and the year (for instance this year it is only about 10% of participants). Rehearsal continues until four thirty and the last ten to fifteen minutes are used to convene and discuss the show; those taking activity buses miss this important part of the process. Solutions might include changing the group discussion to the beginning of the rehearsal, though this jeopardizes the immediacy and freshness of responses after two hours of rehearsing, or having discussions fifteen minutes prior to the bus departure and using the final half hour to continue doing scene work or character development. Others have suggested that we ask students in the program to rely on other transportation (i.e., parents, extended family or friends) so they can remain in the rehearsal for the duration, but I find this to be an unreasonable expectation for many students whose parents work, do not have a vehicle, or are otherwise incapable of meeting this demand. In fact, having activity buses to transport students involved in after-school activities is essential to the participation of many Comedy Club members who may otherwise not be able to be involved. It is particularly frustrating when the school cancels activity buses for the week

because it automatically reduces attendance for that day's rehearsal. Administrative problems issuing from the Montgomery County Public School System, such as these, are seldom resolved through university collaborations, but outside investment in arts education programming can do a great deal to insulate the program and ensure that participants reap the greatest rewards the creative and social process can offer.

### *Institution Meets Fun(ny) Kid Nation*

 In 2002, the Gliner Center for Humor Studies began a partnership with the Comedy Club that lasted four years until the center changed its focus, moving from the American Studies Department in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Maryland, College Park to become the Gliner Center for Humor Communication and Health in the School of Public Health. This shift was predicated on irreconcilable differences (mostly related to the center's key objectives) between former director of the Humor Center and Professor in American Studies, Lawrence Mintz, and the center's benefactor and board member Art Gliner. The Center for Humor Studies provided the Comedy Club with graduate student assistance and some additional funds necessary for the annual production; this is how I became involved with the Comedy Club. Despite Art Gliner's dedication to and insistence on the value of community partnerships, support for the Comedy Club ceased when this transition took place. For the past two years, the Comedy Club has relied on a handful of grants supplying the funds necessary to hire technicians, professional writers and coaches and to purchase equipment, building materials, snacks, and school supplies for this program. The grant-writing process is time consuming and barely yields the funds necessary for the program to function as effectively as it did while partnered with the University of Maryland. Each year, as in the years predating the university's partnership, the program's director and staff, current students and parents pose the very real concern: "Will we have what we need to make this happen for another year?"


This is not meant to bemoan the current lapse in university sponsorship of the Comedy Club, while it is certainly lamentable; rather, in lieu of this collaboration I would like to point towards a number of positive outcomes for the Comedy Club and what I consider public scholarship, a form of academic work that values university partnerships with K-12 schools and community organizations. Nancy Cantor and Steven D. Lavine in a co-authored article titled "Taking Public Scholarship Seriously," describe the goals of public scholarship as democratic work with specific communities "contributing to the public welfare and resulting in 'public good' products" that integrate "discovery, learning and public engagement" (B20). An obvious reason for developing public scholarship in institutions of higher education includes the plentiful resources they have to make significant contributions to the public. They suggest that "[p]olicies that encourage the best of our young faculty members [and I would include the student body here as well] to undertake public scholarship can make alliances between colleges and other knowledge-creating institutions far more deliberate and useful" (B20). These alliances that rely on student involvement and support (i.e., in the form of service learning credits offered through the university to degree-seeking students) also give them the experience and skill sets necessary for generating public scholarship themselves in future careers in academia, non-profit and civil sectors of society. Furthermore, student participation (undergraduate

and graduate) in producing public scholarship grooms young adults in civic and social responsibility and is mutually rewarding to the community and participating students, opening intergenerational dialogues and often provoking creative and innovative outcomes throughout the collaboration.

During the four years the Gliner Center for Humor Studies supported the Comedy Club, we had access to university resources like campus and regional media promotion and university server space for weekly blogging about the rehearsals.<sup>5</sup> Most of the major newspaper and magazine stories about the program were a direct result of individuals in University Relations pushing for media exposure.<sup>6</sup> The blogs posted on the university's website were followed by Comedy Club members, parents, university students and faculty and allowed both participants and the community to bear witness to the artistic and creative process of producing an original full length show with, for and about young people. As the author of these blogs, I sought to represent the program as comprehensively as possible, discussing hardships, triumphs, standout students and poignant shifts in student disposition as they became increasingly confident in themselves on stage and with their peers.

The funds allocated for the Comedy Club from the Gliner Center for Humor Studies provided professional assistance along with incalculable prestige. In the words of Director Harry Bagdasian, the affiliation with the university "was a major catalyst for growth and respectability. I mean, how do you measure an intangible like this?" (Bagdasian Interview). It was easier to obtain grant money during this time as well as additional funds from the PTSA, who began to view this as more than just a typical after school program, rather, as a valuable and notable program bringing regional and national attention to Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School. The additional monies provided much needed sound equipment and the materials necessary to build more elaborate sets. Each year during this collaboration, there was a marked increase in the caliber and quality of the productions. Outside funding (whether via grants, the PTSA, or the Center's assistance) allowed us to hire theatre professionals to lead workshops with the students on sound, lighting, construction, set design and playwriting. The AV crew and art teams—comprised of students attending the middle school, guided by a sound technician, the art teacher and a handful of high school volunteers--were able to gain skills and execute productions on par with any professional theatre company.<sup>7</sup> In fact, many students participating in Comedy Club over the past thirteen years have developed professional careers in theatre, as musicians, actors and comedians, and behind the scenes as stage managers, writers, directors, and sound and lighting technicians. Dozens of alumni return each year for the annual performance to assist with the process or simply to support the Comedy Club; their attendance typically comprises over half of the audience for each production. Their continued loyalty speaks volumes (and they will too if you let them) and attests to the impact this middle school program made in their lives.

#### *My Stake in the Fun(ny) Kid Nation*

 It is evident the impact this program makes (and continues to make) among participants, staff, and local communities. Likewise, it has been an instrumental part of my life—professionally and personally. This university-middle school

collaboration gave me the opportunity to explore work outside of the standard administrative and teaching responsibilities offered graduate student assistants. It allowed me to develop creative skills concomitant with any professional theatrical venture such as technical skills, artistic development, applied theatre training and practical skills such as grant-writing, curriculum development geared towards youth, and negotiating within and between primary and higher educational institutions. The value of this extends beyond the measurable skills developed during this process to an immense personal satisfaction--a satisfaction that struggles for articulation—like the moment of clarity on the face of a student when he finally understood the function of humor in theater of the absurd or when I received flowers from two eighth grade girls who heard that my dog of twelve years passed the day before. These are the intangibles Harry spoke of, the ones that will never be accurately reflected on any curriculum vitae or resume.

Other intangibles yielded from the relationship between the University of Maryland and Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School include the influence this service opportunity had on my own scholarship and teaching—the untold ripple effect and impact of this work on my researching and writing about this program and about university-middle school collaboration, and the inclusion of readings and discussion about public scholarship in my classroom. While this affiliation officially ended in the spring of 2006, I continue to serve as Co-Director and remain committed to the success of this comic theatre program. My positive experiences with the program and my relationships built with students, parents, alumni, program staff, and visiting artists over the past four years shapes my scholarly interests, fueling a desire to enervate traditional methodologies and disciplines with strategies for developing community partnerships and to introduce practical discussions about community development and education--in other words, finding methods for introducing public scholarship into my dissertation and into the courses I teach at the university. This text is one of those attempts in which I hope to make evident the necessity and overall value of incorporating public scholarship into the humanities and social sciences. In fact, this discussion will be included (in some form) in my dissertation, a project that aims to unite critical theory and archival and ethnographic research methodologies with practical applications in the community and classroom, that each may enhance and inform the other, creating dialogic work inclusive of academics/scholars, artists, and those working in the fields of community cultural development.

Working in various capacities as a graduate student, scholar and instructor in higher education, I am repeatedly confronted with the dilemma of how to connect theory and praxis, how to make seemingly esoteric academic readings relevant to the real world. Former Associate Professor at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, Jan Cohen-Cruz, echoes this, saying that the “language of university culture may be at odds with grassroots practice” but that “[f]ield experience challenges academics to rethink not just the expression but also the relationship between practice and theory” (60). Ratna Kapur, in “Dark Times for Liberal Intellectual Thought,” suggests that we imagine the “self as indivisible, as one organic, unfragmented whole, who ultimately is not exclusively intellectual or an activist or this or that but all of these” (30). We should neither treat these domains as mutually exclusive nor be reluctant to educate students about public scholarship and to engage them in the work of community partnerships in



the courses we teach, making it a critical part of the curriculum. In other words, as Cohen-Cruz suggests, offering them the field experience that bridges this divide and instilling in them the indivisibility Kapur avers. What if students were required to be activists and advocates for community cultural development rather than the “chew and spew” method of teaching currently practiced?

Inspired by the success of Comedy Club and seeking to address these concerns, I developed what I coined an “intervention project,” which substituted for a final exam or paper in a special topics summer course in American Studies (AMST 298K) titled *Otherting the Joke: The Resistant Comedy of Marginalized Women*.<sup>8</sup> The course took the tack of examining performance as a means of political praxis using the comic performances of women of color, and queer and disabled women, as case studies. We focused on analyzing performances--what are the intentions of the performer? what is she trying to communicate and are her methods efficacious?—and drawing connections between performance and social change. The goal was to unite the analysis of a popular cultural form with the practical skills of community cultural development. After learning how humor can facilitate social change and communicate ideas, the intervention project asked them to consider ways to mobilize humorous/comic performance on behalf of a specific community. More specifically, they were expected to develop a social program or community event that utilized humor to edify or instruct. I gave them very few restrictions on the scope and content of the project or program and asked that they get as specific as possible in developing the logistics of the program. The final project consisted of a 7-10 page paper outlining the project including a mission statement, project proposal, identification of a target population, and logistical data. I asked that the logistical data be collected as if one intended to bring the project to fruition and, to that end, students submitted a project description early on in the semester and we worked together to connect them with existing grassroots and community organizations useful to achieving the program’s goals. The paper also required them to include a program assessment summarizing the weaknesses and strengths of the project and other practical considerations of implementation.

Along with the paper, students were required to submit a creative digital or visual component appropriate to their project. This aspect of the assignment was left entirely up to the students and the results were incredible. One student created a children’s book using humor to offer lessons about global warming, raising environmental consciousness and social responsibility. Another wrote a full-length humorous play dealing critically with West African cultural practices oppressive to women and the impact of Westernization on small African communities. Her target audience was young Africans and African Americans in Washington, DC and Maryland and throughout the course of the semester she managed to secure sponsorship for its production.<sup>9</sup> Other students created brochures for their would-be programs or organizations such as a performing arts camp for teens with mental health disorders. Other creative submissions included a website providing information on community resources for the elderly, a multi-media curriculum for sex education, and several detailed “dramedy” workshops for emotionally troubled teens.

At first, students struggled with the openness of the assignment and, of course, with being put in the unfamiliar territory of community project development. However, I tried to counteract some of their fears by making the assignment due in stages so I could offer feedback and address their concerns regarding project design, development and implementation. In order to gauge the effectiveness of the assignment and the usefulness of the project, I required students to submit separate evaluations of the project and the process and was pleased with the students' comments. For the most part, students found this to be an original and fulfilling assignment offering them creative licensure while also schooling them in the practical skills of community cultural development. Many students, most of whom were upperclass(wo)men, noted its relevance and usefulness for building skills for the job market, particularly in the non-profit and civil sectors.

If given the opportunity to teach the course again, I would like to explore with university administration the option of offering course credit or service learning hours to students wishing to pursue their projects and develop them further, potentially making it a jumping-off point for them to establish careers in the field. I and other faculty would serve as mentors to students as they move through the various stages of implementing their programs or events. In this way, students would be taught not just about public scholarship and community partnerships, but given the tools and the wherewithal to be the progenitors of public scholarship. Moreover, the university could provide the institutional support necessary and desirable for this kind of community cultural development, similar to that provided by the Center for Humor Studies for the Comedy Club program at Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School, which as I have already argued, is an immense boon to both institutional entities and to those involved.

### *Conclusion*

**F**ormer Principal Mary Beth Waits believes that students involved in extra-curricular activities tend to have higher stakes in their academic performance, employ good time management skills, and handle stress better. Using her many years of experience as an educator and administrator, she concludes that the most successful students are ones that “we have a hook in them beyond the classroom. They want to stay eligible because they want to be able to participate. It brings them into contact frequently with kids that are a different age, social group” (Waits Interview). This broadens their social groups and experiences, exposing them to difference, which typically transforms into an understanding of, if not respect and tolerance for, differences. Many former members of the Comedy Club testify that the program has obvious and lasting positive effects on themselves and others, offering a safe space to explore their lives creatively and humorously without censorship. For shy and reserved students, it provides a space to develop confidence and self-assurance, both concomitant with performing in front of large crowds.<sup>10</sup> One such student, now in eleventh grade, entered the Comedy Club in sixth grade a quiet, self-conscious student. By the time he reached eighth grade he had enough confidence to run for Student Council President—and won.

Participants attest to the emotional, mental, and social benefits of being a member of the Comedy Club, but they also speak just as frequently about the amazing opportunity afforded them to work with Director Harry Bagdasian, a “real professional” (Waits

Interview) and a man who offers the same skill set and dedication to this middle school annual show as he does to his other, far more illustrious and prestigious contracts, among them the U.S. Military's annual theatrical extravaganza "Spirit of America." When asked what it would take to create a similar program in other schools, Austin Villemez, comedy coach and former member of the Comedy Club, pointed toward the necessity of having directors like Harry, a person who believes in young people and recognizes the importance of exporting their issues and experiences to their local community and the general public. There are few persons capable of attempting such an undertaking, but for those who would, the experience is unimaginably rich. As I watch things coalesce on opening night (as I have for four years now), witnessing the profound talent of these young people—well, for me it is like being in a state of grace. For days I can barely discuss the impact of the experience with Harry without getting misty-eyed. Fortunately, for schools that do not have the resources or capacity to create what Harry and Lisa established well over a decade ago, Harry now shares his scripts with hundreds of schools and thousands of students by having his original scripts published annually with an international publishing company, which are being bought and performed in schools in the US, Canada, Germany, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia.<sup>11</sup> That these humorous sketches about young people's lives can translate across cultural boundaries and national borders speaks to the universality of the difficulties associated with coming of age in any region or country. He has also successfully orchestrated the publication of scripts written by the students, making them published authors by the time they reach high school.<sup>12</sup>

I do not think we can underestimate the power of university involvement in community cultural development to lend legitimacy, valuable resources, and publicity, or the impact of arts education in turn to inspire, edify, and contribute to a positive sense of self among its participants. I believe that university collaborations with their outlying communities are nothing short of essential for lending institutional support to community cultural development. The resources available from institutions of higher education are pivotal in strengthening these community efforts and ensuring their success. Reciprocally, community cultural work helps fashion a civic sensibility often muted or altogether disregarded in discipline-specific collegiate training. It provides young students and scholars with an ideal training ground in civil and non-profit sectors along with practical experience useful to the job market.

One young woman, a participant in Comedy Club as both writer and performer, bemoaned the lack of school activities that help young people realize their potential in areas outside of scholastics or athletics, particularly in elementary and middle school. She cautiously began writing for the annual show the first year we accepted a limited number of student sketches, first with a one page commercial easily inserted between longer sketches. The sketch, "Chippin' Dippin' Doughnuts," a spoof of television commercials, which featured a wacky parade of motley characters united in their love for chippin' dippin' doughnuts, was quite successful and all of us encouraged her to continue writing. Three of her sketches, a considerable number given that most writers have one sketch in the final show, were performed in the show "Laughing Matters" (2005). Arlene Goldbard, author of *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, links community cultural work with ideal citizenry: "[s]omeone taking part in a collaborative

theater project, for instance, is able to share a very full and rich experience of citizenship: to be one among many whose ideas and efforts are welcomed equally, who pursue common aims in a climate of respect and affection, who together make something meaningful to themselves and to the whole community” (14). This student comedy writer used the Comedy Club to craft sketches reflecting her life—as a twin, as bi-racial, as a young woman, and as a part of her local and national communities. And because our lives are inextricable and shaped by similar forces, I find it important to note that a twelve-year-old wrote about life: hers, yours, and mine.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from *Rude Cell Phone Guy (The Presidential Debate)*, sketch written by Leah and Rachel Solomon, seventh grade and tenth grade (respectively, at the time of authorship).

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the term polyphonic from the text, “Producing Ethnographies: Theory, Evidence and Representation,” by Robert M. Emerson who cites various ethnographies employing this tactic as a means to “decenter...the privileged voice of the narrator/ethnographer” (316).

<sup>3</sup> GTLD is the acronym in the Montgomery County school system that refers to students placed in the Gifted and Talented and Learning Disabled Program. Students can also be classified and enrolled in the Gifted and Talented Program (GT) or the Learning Disabled Program (LD).

<sup>4</sup> These questions were taken from Questionnaire #3, created by Harry Bagdasian and Lisa Levin Itte.

<sup>5</sup> The following hyperlink connects to a press release made by Dave Ottalini in University Relations on the online UM NewsDesk about the upcoming Comedy Club show *Laughing Matters*. Links to the blogs for the academic year 2004-05 are provided below the press release. <http://www.newsdesk.umd.edu/culture/release.cfm?ArticleID=994>

<sup>6</sup> The Comedy Club has been the focus of articles in well-known magazines and newspapers including: *Washingtonian Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, and National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered*.

<sup>7</sup> Montgomery County schools require high school students to serve eighty or more community service hours throughout the four years of their high school education. Many Comedy Club alumni return to the program as high school aides and assistants and have proven instrumental to the success of the program. They serve in an administrative capacity and also as mentors, providing one-on-one coaching with middle school participants.

<sup>8</sup> The course was accepted as a core course fulfilling undergraduate coursework requirements to take at least one course listed as a human cultural diversity course and/or an interdisciplinary/emerging issues course.

<sup>9</sup> When the course concluded, there were a handful of projects that were in stages suitable for further development with existing organizations or as stand-alone programs. I encouraged these students to pursue these projects and offered my assistance in bringing them to fruition. In spite of busy schedules and demanding coursework, a few of them did so.

<sup>10</sup> Austin Villemez specifically noted this phenomenon of shy students becoming more confident and extroverted throughout the duration of their time spent in the Comedy Club, sometimes over a span of three years and also within just one year’s time. He has been involved in the program as participant or assistant for over a decade. This phenomenon is remarked upon repeatedly by various parents, participants and staff.

<sup>11</sup> All scripts have been published by Meriwether Publishing, LTD Contemporary Drama Service. This company publishes and distributes plays internationally for students ranging in age from 5-19.

<sup>12</sup> The opening passage is an excerpt from one such script published by a number of students in the Comedy Club. See Solomon, L. & Solomon, R.

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