



Life Skills & Laughter

THE FIRST IMPROV GROUP OF COMICS WITH DOWN SYNDROME HITS ITS MARK IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

“NICK, WHY DO YOU HAVE THE GRINCH TIED UP?” Chris Bean asked his scene partner.

“I left on Christmas morning as soon as I realized what the Grinch did to our town, and I am bringing him back to face justice!” Nick Doyle announces proudly.

“Oh, I guess you didn’t hear....” Chris sheepishly tells Nick, on stage for “The Improvaneers present...Not Your Average News Team.”

Improvational comedy is a place where anything can happen and usually does—and in this case, the adage is particularly true. Every member of this unlikely improv troupe has Down syndrome.

“They can get to the creativity faster. They’ll just say it,” said Rob Snow, a former comic who coaches the Improvaneers and created the group’s training program two years ago. “There’s a natural performance ability with people with Down syndrome. They’re not very shy when they get on stage.”

And like any cast of unscripted comics, the Improvaneers are quick on their feet—they have to be. In one routine, the audience will shout out random occupations before the cast members take turns spontaneously acting out the “world’s worst” one.

A dentist ... with horrible teeth, for example.

Or a ping-pong player ... who plays with a drumstick, the chicken-leg variety.

This is the kind of hit-and-get performance that requires an open mind and quick thinking, not to mention self-confidence. Snow remembers the emotional evening when the Improvaneers successfully performed their first-ever back-to-back sold-out shows in Ohio in 2019.

“It blew everyone’s mind, even mine,” Rob said. “It was bigger and better than even I thought it could be. We had practiced and performed, but until you get 300 people sitting in the audience you don’t know what’s going to happen. They just rose to the occasion—and of course, I’m backstage bawling.”

COMIC TALENTS, LIFE SKILLS

The benefits of learning the art of improv go well beyond the emotion-filled accolades of a standing ovation, especially for adults with Down syndrome. To hear Snow tell it, the skills of improvisational comedy turn out to be the life skills that everyone needs.

“It’s like problem-solving, quick thinking, creative thinking, eye contact, voice projection, listening and focus, teamwork, adapting to change. If you can do that, then you can greatly increase their social and workplace opportunities,” he said.

What’s more, one of the cardinal rules of improv is something that resonates particularly among those with Down syndrome: Always say “yes,” and then run with it. In other words, when your cast mate goes somewhere on stage, you follow them there, no matter how absurd or difficult.

“The challenge is [these performers] have been told ‘no’ a lot,” Snow explained. “There is a spark when they hear the concept of ‘yes, and ...’ Wait, anything goes? [These performers] are going against a lot of what they’ve been told and taught their whole life.”

A clear case in point is Nick Doyle, who at 31 is among the oldest Improvaneers. Because shyness was never one of Doyle’s problems, he quickly became a natural leader of the troupe. Still, Doyle has also gradually learned the powers of humility and teamwork.

“When I’m on stage, I get all hyped and I get pumped,” he said. “It feels like I’m stronger when I set [my cast mates] up [for a laugh]. I’m like the big brother of the Improvaneers. I have made mistakes, but my cast mates got my back.”

A ‘STANDUP’ GUY

The natural truths of improv were honed by troupe founder Snow in the late 1990s while he trained at the famed Second City in Chicago and performed at comedy clubs and colleges throughout the Midwest. After tiring of comedy’s realities—namely waiting tables—Snow followed a familiar path of getting a “real job.” But his life would change again—dramatically—in 2009 when his second son, Henry, was born with Down syndrome.

“The doctor gave us this pamphlet. It was just everything negative,” Snow said. “Why don’t we get the pamphlet on the things I’ve learned since then?”

Once Snow figured things out for himself, he began touring his own humorous one-man show about his experiences raising a child with special needs. Before long, he and his wife, Ellen, co-founded Ohio-based Stand Up for Downs, a nonprofit that began producing comedy shows and other special events to raise money for organizations supporting the Down syndrome community.

It was not until Snow visited an old friend from his comedy stomping grounds that the idea for the Improvaneers took center stage. During the conversation, the friend mentioned that she had always wanted to teach improv to people with Down syndrome.

"I was like, 'How did I not think of this?'" Snow recalled.

Since the friend had two small children and was pregnant with triplets, Snow readily "stole" the idea—with the friend's enthusiastic permission. Before long, classes were scheduled at a Cleveland playhouse and the Improvaneer method was born.

"We had this hypothesis we wanted to prove," Snow said.

PROVING THE HYPOTHESIS

Although clinical studies have yet to be conducted, the anecdotes are already speaking volumes about a program that has garnered praise from the likes of Dr. Kishore Vellody, the director of Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and a board member of National Down Syndrome Congress.

Success stories run the gamut—a now-talkative child who barely spoke before taking preliminary classes, as well as young adults who have found their own way professionally since building confidence as Improvaneer cast members. Theresa Buzzelli, for example, had limited articulation when she joined the cast, but has since been promoted from a job in the backroom of a restaurant to a new position in frontline customer service.

"It was immediate," Snow said of the change. "The manager looks up and the table is laughing with her. She's hugging somebody out there. He saw what that was doing—not just for her, but for the customers. Now she greets people at the door."

Similarly, Lisa Doyle, Nick's mother, says her son has not only discovered his destiny as a born entertainer, but his career potential in professional venues he had never before thought possible.

"It really expanded his ability to think more quickly, to problem-solve more creatively," Doyle said, noting that Nick had been miserable for years in his grocery-storage job, but as an Improvaneer he found the will to interact with others and share his ready sense of humor. "He gave up a significant amount of money to follow his passion."

After exploring career opportunities with nonprofits that assist the disabled community, Nick landed a job with the organization that had helped him find his way in the first place, as an assistant cast director and sales associate for Stand Up for Downs. He also sits on the group's board.

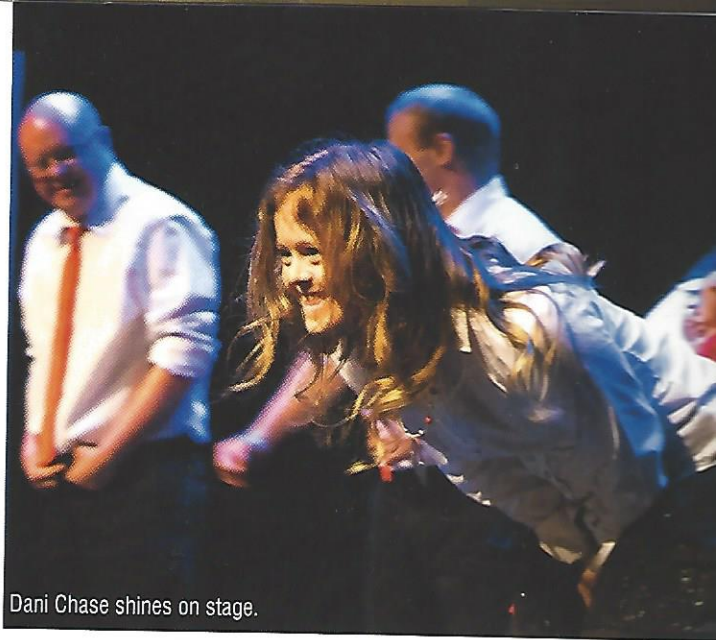
"He feels valued," Lisa said. "To me, he is walking, breathing, living proof of the value this program can bring to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities."

Snow is striving to quantify such results in a partnership with Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center with an evaluation system that shows participants have demonstrated an average of 60% improvement in such skills as quick thinking and teamwork. Meanwhile, Snow and Nick Doyle are working to license the Improvaneer method to organizations across the country, where in some cases the program is being adapted to fit other disabilities, including autism.

As an improv comic, Doyle has gotten used to making it up as he goes along, but now he is sure of one thing that will not change.

"The Improvaneers is my baby, and I want to keep doing it," he said.

"Truth be told, I'm never going to stop." ●



Dani Chase shines on stage.



L-R: Nick Doyle, Henry Snow, Maggie Bisesi (VP/Lead Trainer), Ellen Snow, Rob Snow (CEO/Founder), Charlie Snow



Improvaneers discuss strategy. L-R: Nick Doyle, Chris Bean, Rob Snow

To learn more about the Improvaneers, visit standupfordowns.org