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Unscripted, Unrehearsed, Unbothered

No preparation needed to join this new club

BY LINDSEY DAVIS  DESIGN KALEY LEMPKE  PHOTO ISAAC BIEHL

They were watching “Whose Line is it Anyway?” like they had many times before when inspiration struck. Iowa State students Joey Cataldo, Kevin Ruth and former student Chad Rietschel decided it was time they give improv a try themselves. At the time, there was no improv club on campus, so the three saw it as their duty to start a club despite having little experience. In spring 2014, they officially founded the Iowa State Improv Comedy Club.

Cataldo, a freshman at the time, admits they had no prior knowledge of how to start or run a club. He states it was confidence in their abilities to pick up an art and create something for all to enjoy that was the driving force behind the club's creation.

“We wanted to create a low-key environment that appealed to any and all individuals who have either just dabbled with improv in the past, were experts, or never even considered it before,” Cataldo, the president of the club, says.

When the club first began in the spring of 2014, there were only six members. They relied on friends and members of Grandma Mojo’s, Iowa State’s improv comedy troupe, to teach them the basics of improv. By the fall semester of 2014, the group decided to open their doors to more members. Now the club averages 20 members at each meeting, where they spend a majority of their time practicing improv techniques.

“Much of the inspiration for games which are played stem from the show “Whose Line is it Anyway?” as well as games played by the popular Iowa State improv troupe, Grandma Mojo’s,” Cataldo says.
Some specific games the club plays include “Party Quirks,” “Location, Occupation, Means of Death” and “Dueling Typewriters.” They say part of the fun comes from creating outrageously unique characters and personas. Toward the end of the club’s meetings, members can participate in a jam session that allows anybody to hop in and start whatever kind of scene they’d like. A vivid memory shared by many Improv Club members is the recurring grandmother characters, Ethel and Carol, created by Chad Rietschel and senior JT O’Connor at one of the jam sessions. These two grandmotherly characters received positive feedback and began showing up weekly, resulting in the ongoing adventures of Ethel and Carol.

“[Ethel and Carol] would do things like buy from street drug dealers, hypocritically scold dangerous killers for being unethical, and kidnap celebrities and freeze them in our basement. We did that last one a lot. At the last meeting, Ethel and Carol had one last adventure that resulted in a ridiculous betrayal/murder/remorseful suicide. One of the members legitimately cried during this,” O’Connor says.

Though the club offers lots of laughs and fun, it also prides itself on teaching valuable skills that extend far beyond techniques specific to improv.

“If you’re confident enough to act like a baby zebra interrogating a box of tissues, you can handle anything the ‘real world’ has to offer. We also teach communication skills,” says Kevin Ruth, the vice president of the club. “Improv isn’t about being funny. That’s a huge misconception. In fact, if you try to be funny, you’ll probably ruin it. Improv is all about feeding off of your partners to create something natural, but sort of wacky.”

Ruth says he’s learned a lot since he started going to club meetings.

“I used to think improv was fake — no way could people make funny scenes without practicing...but I was so wrong,” he says. “I won’t say it’s easy, but if you are a good listener and you can generate ideas as fast as you can talk, you’re golden. I think everyone should try it.”

Improv club even allows introverted people to break out of their shell and learn valuable communication skills.

“Not only does the club teach fundamentals of improv, but it opens people’s minds to find their inner creativity. Even some of the shyest and most introverted students who decided to give our club a shot have learned to step out of their comfort zone and embrace being spontaneous, loud and outgoing. It really helps people on all fronts when it comes to social interaction in everyday life,” Cataldo says.

The Iowa State Improv Comedy Club sees a consistent turn-out at their meetings each week. In a year, the founding members of the club will graduate, so the future of the club is still unknown. However, they doubt that the club will fade and cease to exist.

“It’s too popular of an idea. It’s scary to think about how it will morph once we leave. Maybe even for the better. And at the end of the day, that really excites me. Knowing I helped create something that might live on once I’m gone is a rewarding feeling. That’s the adventure I chose at Iowa State and I’m leaving it behind for someone else to find,” Ruth says.

Club meetings are every Sunday from 4-6 pm in Carver 0268.

Breaking it Down

Wondering what an improv game looks like? Here are some of the club’s favorites — feel free to try them out yourself!

“The Line Game” the group splits into two lines and one line initiates a scene with an opening quote, then someone from the other line responds adding onto the scene. A short three–four line dialogue is formed, and then the next two people take their turn.

“Four Square” involves four people and they orient themselves into a square formation. Each person receives a one word suggestion which they will use to perform a scene with the person next to them in the square. They rotate one person at a time and do their respective scenes until they’ve rotated to do a scene three times.

“Jam” a free form improv session that involves everyone in the club. Someone will go up voluntarily and begin a scene. From there, up to three other people will enter the scene. You can create any character, location and conflict/resolution that comes to mind. The two to four people in the scene need to pick up on every nuance or plot points in each scene and remain on the same page as the others in order to make a successful scene. It’s an opportunity for people to dial in on their strengths and weaknesses as improvisers.