

Out and About: Comedy for your cause



A crowd gathers last month at the Windham Club in Willimantic for a Comedy for a Cause event that sold out.



January 03, 2018 7:17 am

By **Sue Menhart** Special to The Times

Does anybody remember laughter?

I had been longing for the old days of the Treehouse Comedy Club shows in southeastern Connecticut where you could pay a cover, sit in a chair, and fall over said chair busting a gut.

I needed a good laugh. With the exception of the casinos, New Haven, Boston or New York, where could I guffaw in public?

I had had enough of Netflix, prime time sitcoms and HBO Comedy specials glossed over with fancy camera angles. I wanted something real. I wanted to heckle. I wanted my stomach to ache.

So I found out about these comedy shows being held locally at random venues, and always for charity. Franco's Comedy for Your Cause ended up being just the cure I was looking for.

Frank Carofano, known as Franco the morning radio host on K-HITS 100.9 and former Q-105 program director, had been putting together local comedy shows and advertising them like crazy on Facebook, so I set about to check one out.

I drove out to the Windham Club in Willimantic, paid \$20 to go toward the Willimantic Rotary and bought some raffle tickets. Prizes included wine, candy and movie baskets.

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Darren Rivera, Howi

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on the bill were

In the beautifully decorated room there were tables and seats for about 130 people. It was sold out.

Franco's partner in these shows, Kimberly Page, got the music going with "Landslide" by Stevie Nicks.

As the lights dimmed, the room had a New York comedy club feel, though this was a golf course country club. Franco did some announcements at 7:45 p.m. and at precisely 7:55 p.m. he introduced the Willimantic Rotary rep who got up to pitch the raffle tickets while the crowd treated him to some light-hearted heckling.

Franco took back the mic and yelled, "Are we ready for a show? From Last Comic Standing, give it up for Darren Rivera!"

Rivera placed his water and phone on the stool. Nobody sits in stand-up comedy, I presume. Some flowery language ensued, as this was billed as an adults-only show. (When your organization books a comedy show you have a choice between G, PG, and R.)

Everybody laughed at every joke. Not because they felt they had to but because the bits were simply hilarious. All eyes were on the comic, including the staff.

"Don't worry about the lime slices!" somebody said. Exactly 20 minutes later, he introduced the next comic, Mason.

Five minutes into the second comic, my stomach ached. Not from the mozzarella sticks or the wine, but from the stories and jokes.

I lost my mascara on the Old Milwaukee Beer bit as he went on to jib and jab the craft beer revolution. It seemed the comics knew the psyche of the crowd and what would make them laugh.

He moved on to marriage, perfect for the crowd, and everybody got it. Franco waved a flashlight at the comic for a five minute warning.

Headliner Romanoff was up next. It turned into an HBO Comedy Special at this point; Eddie Murphy "Raw" comes to mind. I started coughing and choking uncontrollably when he launched into some airplane jokes.

I had to sneak out to the ladies room, and through a closed door to the banquet room and down a hallway I could hear the roars of laughter from the bathroom stall.

Romanoff reminded me of Robin Williams: rapid fire down the rabbit hole kind of comedy, all while reacting to little heckles here and there. I don't know how comedians remember their skits interacting with the crowd at the same time. It was just a joy to watch live in person.

I thought I was about to die when he went on about marriage, home buying, having a child and finally about getting a dog. He did not stop. Somehow he fit in a Harvey Weinstein joke during the dog bit, I don't know how.

"Our shows can stand up to any comedy club in the country. I mean it," said Franco with a smile.

After 90 minutes, it was over. Raffle winners were announced, and a quick tally of the proceeds from the evening netted \$2,660 which was then emblazoned on a giant check for the Rotary.

Franco started doing these shows when a co-worker of his got sick.

To date, he and his partner Kimberly have raised over \$100,000 in two years for charities through these comedy nights. The events usually raise around \$1,200 to \$5,000, but a recent show held at the Ocean Beach Port 'N Starboard titled "Stand Up for Puerto Rico" raised \$8,500. Events are held at VFWs, Elks Clubs, restaurants, anywhere your organization wants really, and for any cause.

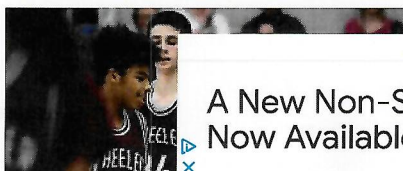
I will be attending more "Comedy for Your Cause" shows, as they are open to the public and you don't have to be a part of the organization that is holding the event to attend. At this one, I was laughing so hard I forgot about my desire to heckle.

A tip: Do some abdomen training to get in shape before you attend. Your gut gets a workout.

Check out www.ComedyForYourCause.com for the schedule and more information.

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