Comic belief

Stand-up guy Paul Anthony is serious about the Long Island Comedy Festival

BY CLAUDIA GRYVATZ COPQUIN
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Long Island Comedy Festival creator Paul Anthony, front, joins fellow comedians Chris Davis, left, Eric Haft, John Santo, Keith Anthony and Bryan McKenna outside Theatre Three in Port Jefferson.

JOHN LANNY

Something funny-side-up is in the works across Long Island this summer. Actually, it's been happening for 10 years and remains a laughing matter.

About 50 stand-up comics are preparing to take the laughs on the road, touring Long Island theaters from Great Neck to Riverhead with stops in between, as part of the Long Island Comedy Festival.

The festival is celebrating its 10th anniversary and continuing its mission to promote the art of live, stand-up comedy. Staging the acts at theatrical venues rather than in traditional comedy clubs such as Governor's of Levittown or The Brokerage in Bellmore is the brainchild of part-time funnyman Paul Anthony, 51.

By day, Anthony has serious responsibilities as general sales manager at Connoisseur Media in Farmingdale. But in his off hours, the Massapequa resident runs the Long Island Comedy Festival, which he founded in 2006 while working in advertising sales at WALK radio (now a Connoisseur Media station).

"Back in 2005, I was charged with finding a venue to host a comedy fundraiser that the radio station wanted to produce," Anthony said. "There were several charities that WALK supported back then, all of them Long Island-based. That fundraiser was called Comedy for a Cause, and was a one-time event" held at Theatre Three in Port Jefferson.

While the theater hosts a long-running improv troupe called Friday Night Face-Off, stand-up comedy had never been staged there, according to managing director Vivian Koutrakos. But the fundraiser was a hit, and a year later Anthony proposed to Koutrakos a turnkey event showcasing six up-and-coming comedians, a formula that Anthony has repeated ever since.

'A whole different vibe'

This year, the joke-telling kicks off on July 11, with a showcase on the main stage at Theatre Three. It will be followed by nine more shows lined up at venues such as The Madison Theater in Rockville Centre, the Suffolk Theater in Riverhead and the Gold Coast Arts Center in Great Neck.

Comic Rich Walker, 50, of Deer Park, has been part of the comedy festival from the start and said he enjoys the format and performing in a theater setting.

"A theater is a whole different vibe than a comedy club," Walker said. "You don't have waitresses walking around," which can be distracting for both the performer and the audience.

In addition, every comedy festival show features five or six comedians performing equally short sets, another departure from comedy clubs, which typically advertise one headliner per show. In a form of respect to the talent, Walker said Anthony advertises everyone on the show so there is no "star" billing.

Honing his act

The idea to create this type of comedy showcase was born from Anthony's early experience in stand-up.



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Anthony yuks it up at his day job as general sales manager at Connoisseur Media.

"When I started doing comedy in the city [in 2004], I did shows at Stand Up NY for a year, usually on a Thursday night on what they called a showcase," he recalled. "They'd have anywhere from 10 to 15 comedians on, usually for eight minutes each."

Anthony applied that structure to the Long Island Comedy Festival. Audiences pay $35 per person for the 90-minute show, which he often emcees. Anthony's first emcee gig was in 1996, when he was a 30-something graduate student at the University of Notre Dame.

"I emceed the annual MBA Talent Show for two years in a row," he said. "My material was solely based on making fun of both the students and the professors, all of whom were in the audience."

But he took a liking to it, and in 2001, while working in radio advertising sales, Anthony began doing roasts of the employees at the annual WALK radio Christmas party. Two years later, his general manager, Jim Condron, secretly signed him up to do shtick in front of the whole company — more than 600 employees — at the annual Clear Channel Christmas Party at Webster Hall in Manhattan.

"Only three people in the front row actually watched my act," Anthony said. "Later that night, I was approached by comedian Bob DiBuono, who saw my act and asked me to perform at Stand Up NY comedy club."

Anthony honed his act there for a full year, and by 2006, realizing Long Island was minus its own comedy festival, he was ready to launch his showcase. The festival provides a platform for stand-up comics who aren't part of the mainstream and includes his cousin Keith Anthony, 50, of Glen Cove.

It has become something he's proud of and passionate about.

"During the past 10 years, the comedy festival has become a labor of love for me," Anthony said. "The comedians are an incredible motivating factor for me, and have been so encouraging. . . . Our Long Island fans have also been incredibly supportive, coming out to our shows year after year and voicing their positive feedback."

That feedback of course, is laughter.

The laughs are here

To commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Long Island Comedy Festival, this summer's schedule includes two showcases featuring 10 comics each. The final schedule will be on longislandcomedy.com
Confirmed dates:

- **July 11** — Theatre Three, Port Jefferson
- **July 18** — The Madison Theatre, Rockville Centre
- **July 23** — Gold Coast Arts Center, Great Neck; the Suffolk Theater, Riverhead
- **Aug. 7** — Sonoma Grill, Holtsville
- **Aug. 28** — Theatre Three, Port Jefferson
- **Aug. 29** — Theatre Three, Port Jefferson

Be a class clown

Want to learn how to do stand-up comedy? You can with a seven-week course at Stand-Up University. It's taught by comics Rich Walker, Peter Bales and Steve Lazarus and costs $295. The course is at The Brokerage Comedy Club, 2797 Merrick Rd., Bellmore.

New classes begin June 30 and Sept. 8. For more information, go to standupuniversity.com or call 516-810-5447.

— CLAUDIA GRYVATZ COPQUIN