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# Troubled teens playing it for laughs in comedy class

By [Maureen Magee](#)  
Union-Tribune Staff Writer

2:00 a.m. September 26, 2009



“The best part about living like me, you can drive your house,” said Sam Sloan, 16, aka “Sam the Trailer Man,” as he ran through his stand-up routine during class Thursday.



Lashanae Steward, 16, performed her stand-up routine Thursday for classmates at the county Office of Education community school in National City. (Nelvin C. Cepeda / Union-Tribune) -

Lashanae Steward (left) is one of about 20 students enrolled in “Laughter Is the Best Medicine,” a stand-up-comedy class through the county Office of Education that was paid for with \$6,500 in federal stimulus money. (Nelvin C. Cepeda / Union-Tribune)

**NATIONAL CITY** — Drugs, violence, teen pregnancy and incarceration — not exactly the stuff of punch lines and laugh tracks.

Unless it's the teens telling the jokes. And the material is coming from their own experiences.

San Diego County high school students who struggle to cope with these issues are confronting them head-on in an unlikely stand-up-comedy class that also serves as therapy of sorts.

Paid for with \$6,500 in federal stimulus money, this new course was designed for students who are interested in the entertainment industry. But it has also helped teenagers face their demons and relate to classmates at the county Office of Education community school in National City.

“My life has always been crazy. I have anger issues; that's why I'm here,” said Sam Sloan, 16, who was booted from two high schools before enrolling in the community school this year. “When I come up to the microphone, it's all good. I can be myself.”

Still, Sam said it wasn't easy in the beginning.

When he was told to come up with material for an act, he hesitated before opening his journal and writing, “I live in a trailer.”

Now when the National City resident gets onstage, he's “Sam the Trailer Man.” The gags flow from there.

“The best part about living like me, you can drive your house,” Sam said while rehearsing his act in class. “Why is it when cops pull me over, it's the same question — ‘Will you please step out of the vehicle and put your hands on the porch?’”

Vince Fields, a 15-year-old from San Diego's Skyline neighborhood, pokes fun at racist stereotypes in his act. He's half white and half black, a combination that has made him a target for taunting.

Vince opens with a rap that teases his white relatives: “I'm a white boy, my neck is red, I like to put mayonnaise on my Wonder bread.”

About 20 students enrolled in the course, “Laughter Is the Best Medicine,” this year. It's taught by Sandi C. Shore, who hails from a family that's well-versed in comedy.

“These kids have been through a lot. I am blown away at their honesty and their creativity — they don't hold anything back,” said Shore, who herself was “kicked out of Beverly Hills High.”

Shore has taught comedy courses at colleges and at her family's Comedy Store in La Jolla before taking on high school students. Her father, Sammy, was a comic who warmed up audiences for Elvis Presley in Las Vegas. Her mother, Mitzi, has long run the iconic Comedy Store in Hollywood, and her brother, Pauly, is a comedian and actor.

Tony Limoges was taking Shore's comedy class in La Jolla to improve his public-speaking skills when it occurred to him that his students might also benefit from such a course.

“These kids need educators to think outside the box and expose them to something different,” said Limoges, a county Office of Education principal for Juvenile Court and community schools. “We (the National City campus) lost four kids since March to violence. They need an outlet.”

The principal contacted Shore and urged her to teach his students. The class is funded with a federal grant through the San Diego Workforce Partnership's Hire-A-Youth program.

In addition to writing comedy routines, the students took a field trip to the Comedy Store in La Jolla. For most, it was their first time to the swanky beach community and to a comedy club. Many of the students have avoided classes or situations that require public speaking, so they're also forced to take that on by presenting their acts.

Limoges even joins the students from time to time, working on his act, which includes stories from his career teaching at-risk teens. One bit recounts a field trip to a museum when a student swiped an ancient African pipe that was used before it was returned.

“You know how hard it is to get *that* smell out; try getting it out of an 800-year-old Swahili pipe,” Limoges said.

On Monday, the young comedians will perform their acts before an invited audience of students and professional comics. Limoges will also take any who are brave enough to perform at an “open mike” event at the Comedy Store, giving them a chance to go onstage before a real audience.

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**[Maureen Magee](#): (619) 293-1369;**

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