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Laughter's still the best medicine

Davis group uses games, exercises to attain jollies

By CHRIS ERICKSON/Special to the Daily Democrat

At 6:45 in the morning, Davis' Central Park is still dark. The street lamps are still on. There's sparse traffic on 5th Street, and only a few bicyclists out.

Under the pavilion, Deb Roquet has set up a small table with a navy blue cloth draped over it. There are some brochures and handouts and a boom box playing a laughter track. The man on the CD is whooping it up and pretty soon someone else joins him, and they carry on like it's late at night.

People begin arriving: A couple of women pull up in a car.

"We're here because we're curious," they say to Roquet. Two more arrive by bicycle. A college student crosses 5th and makes her way across the field to the pavilion. Another woman walking a small, white poodle drifts in.

This is the first meeting of the Davis Laughter Club. There are about 5,000 laughter clubs worldwide, according to <http://www.laughteryoga.org>. Dr. Madan Kataria, a family physician, formed the first club in India in 1995.

The class opens with participants "introducing" themselves. They walk around, look each other in the eyes, and laugh. They say, "Ho, ho! Ha, ha, ha!" and clap their hands in time with each syllable. The laughter isn't brought on by jokes, it's simulated.

But as the old laughter club adage goes, "Simulated laughter creates stimulated laughter," and it doesn't take long for the members to start laughing for real.

After the warm-up, the group forms into a semi-circle and Roquet talks about how she became involved with laughter clubs.

"I've always had this fantasy of being a comedian," she tells the class. "But there's one problem: I'm not funny." Everyone laughs.

Roquet is a natural and welcoming instructor. Her actual title is certified laugh leader. She became certified after attending a two-day workshop with Steve Wilson, a licensed and consulting psychologist, and the founder of World Laughter Tour. At the workshop, she learned about the psychological effects of humor and laughter, as well as how to organize and lead her own laughter club.

After the introductions they move on to the "electric current exercise." Everyone reaches out to one another to shake hands, but pulls back just before they touch and shouts out



The new members of the Davis Laughter Club having an absolute ball during a laugh exercise. (Mischa Erickson/Special to The Daily Democrat)

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and laughs, as if they've gotten shocked. Everyone is truly laughing - except for the little poodle. His leash has been tied to a lamppost a few feet away, and he yaps at the ladies during the game. When the electric current game is finished, the owner unties the dog and takes him on a short walk around the park.

The college student is standing to the side, just watching. Participation is not mandatory; if a curious person wants to come and have a look, no problem.

The club does some light stretching and gentle breathing exercises. Roquet mentions some of the research going on in the field of humor and laughter.

While the detrimental effects of stress are well known, laughter seems to have the opposite effect on the body. A study conducted by the University of Maryland Medical Center in 2000 concluded that an active sense of humor might actually prevent heart attacks. Subsequent studies have shown that laughter is linked to healthy function of blood vessels and a strong immune system. There's a reason why two of the main figures in laughter companies today are doctors.

The sun has come up and the street lamps have gone off. Traffic on 5th Street has picked up and there is a steady procession of bikes on 3rd Street headed toward campus. The laughter club members are mingling, sticking their tongues out and making Frankenstein-like groaning noises - rather appropriate with Halloween coming up. One of the ladies has stepped to the side, laughing so hard that she is unable to continue. The shy student is laughing, though she hasn't joined in. It seems like the whole town is laughing, too.

The first meeting of the Davis Laughter Club comes to an end. The poodle is untied and led away. The student walks back across the field toward campus. A few participants linger, chatting about the meeting and picking up fliers.

Cecilia Durand, of Davis, one of the participants, hopes to pass on some of the laugh exercises she learned to the seniors and kids with whom she volunteers. "For me, without laughter, what is there?" she says. "We need more of it in the world."

Roquet wants to start laughter clubs for kids in the morning before school. Ultimately, she also hopes to have an "intergenerational" club with participants of all ages. The goal is to make people happier, to give them a place to be playful and have fun. And the new members of the Davis Laughter Club are smiling and plan to come back for more.

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