

Juvenile Jokesters

Kids get lesson in professional stand-up comedy

BY LARRY NEUMEISTER
The Associated Press

Baby-faced 16-year-old Eric Kurn climbed onto the comedy club stage, gave the packed room a look of wide-eyed cluelessness and launched into his deadpan bit: "I think it's time I had a girlfriend . . ."

N> There's just one little problem. None of the girls I know think it's time I had a girlfriend."

"Even some of the girls I don't know yet agree with that," the redhead went on like a teenage Rodney Dangerfield, to cascades of laughter.

With the afternoon crowd of 300 won over, Kurn coasted through his act, touching on the art of adolescent lying and lamenting that parents can use technology to check homework and grades online.

That's the way it goes with "Kids 'N Comedy," a nearly 17-year-old laugh train that gives some budding class clowns, ages 9 to 18, a chance to learn the nuances of comedy without facing a trip to the principal's office.

Nine-week classes and two-week summer camps give children some basic training in comedy club work before a final exam of



Val Bodurtha chastises teens' political views in her shtick.



Zach Rosenfeld, 14, started stand-up when he was 9.

sorts — a performance before a paying audience of strangers.

The classes originated with Jo Ann Grossman, a Manhattan woman with no training in comedy, and her husband, Stu, who teaches some of the classes. In staging the comedy acts, starting out in 1996, they quickly realized they had to impose lim-

its on kids and their unfiltered funny thoughts. "We wanted it to be clean," Grossman said.

That ground rule wasn't the hard part for 14-year-old Zach Rosenfeld, who recalled his first class when he was 9 and the sheer terror of trying, and perhaps failing, to be funny.

"I was very nervous," he said. "But after sitting through a couple of those classes, I started to open up more and more . . . The class teaches you to calm down and not be so scared."

Class participants were told to write down funny things in their lives, and refine some of those thoughts into an act.

Rosenfeld says he sat nervously before he went on stage that first time, tapping his foot and trying to remember his lines, only to get before the crowd and forget most of them.

"I could get away with it because I was cute. I was 9,"



Teen comic Eric Kurn laments about his love life in his routine.

he said. "I was blacking out with part of the routine. I just started talking to the audience, 'I like this table.' They were laughing."

When he walked offstage, he said, he knew he would perform again. And he has.

Most recently, Rosenfeld did his act at the Kids 'N Comedy holiday show at the Gotham Comedy Club, dubbed the "Christmakwanzukah" show. He wasn't alone.

Val Bodurtha, 16, pulled out a banjo, singing a song chastising classmates who tout views on social issues and politics. She sang: "You should really learn your facts before you begin to speak" and "stop posting pictures of your

meals and gratuitous shots of you." At one point, she said "fricking," the show's closest brush with profanity.

The sold-out show — the first at Gotham in the history of Kids 'N Comedy — was a milestone for Grossman and a credit to the classes, which cost \$595, and comedy summer camps, which cost \$1,045.

Grossman said professional results from hard work.

"We try to motivate them to write all the time," she said. "If you want to keep it fresh, you have to keep on writing."

"To see these kids, they're funny, they're really funny," Grossman said.

"Nobody's doing knock-knock jokes."