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Buddy Club spares time for the kids

by Bonnie Wach

It's Sunday morning in the city, about the time most Saturday night-clubbers are reaching for their second cup of French roast, and the party at the Randall Museum is just ramping up.

As comedian Greg Frisbee desperately tries to untangle himself from a straitjacket while hanging upside down suspended from a chain, a packed house of prepubescents and their parents are shouting out encouragement to a little girl who is whacking him with a stale baguette. By the time Frisbee finally makes his escape, the audience is howling, red faced with laughter. Offstage, Scott Gelfand is smiling with satisfaction.

"I measure the success of a show by the level of laughter," says the soft-spoken founder of the Buddy Club, who celebrates 20 years as the impresario of live family entertainment this month. "If I put on a blindfold, I have to hear laughter 90 percent of the time. That's how I choose my acts."

During the past two decades, Gelfand's instinct for what makes kids laugh has turned birthday-party entertainment into a thriving cottage industry: More than 15,000 families attend sold-out Buddy Club shows every year in San Francisco, Berkeley and San Rafael. Gelfand sees it as a way not only to get parents and kids to share quality time together, but to introduce them to talented entertainers who might otherwise be unable to make a full-time living doing what they love.

Among the club's claims to fame is jump-starting the careers of clown Derique, the hapless and hilarious Zappo the Magician and children's singer and songwriter Gary Lapow. Dozens of other jugglers, musicians, ventriloquists, puppeteers, clowns and acrobats have also found audiences for their antics here.

"When I first started, I had a Yellow Pages ad in the phone book. Performing at the Buddy Club was one of the primary things that helped build my career," says Larry Wright (Zappo the Magician), who began performing at Gelfand's shows 19 years ago. "It's incredible exposure. Without the Buddy Club, it comes down to libraries and school assemblies for many children's entertainers."

The appeal of the shows should be apparent to anyone who has ever attended one. First and foremost, there's no shushing. Also, no "down in front." Kids are the stars here. They get to sit on the floor right in front of the stage where they're encouraged to yell, jump and cheer. Birthday

celebrants get their own personalized tickets with their names on them that they pass out to their friends, and they get to go onstage and be part of the show. Afterward, everyone files out to tables full of organic snacks provided by the club's sponsors.

"One of the most important things is that the kids are never the brunt of the joke," says Gelfand. "The joke is always on the performers. The best jugglers drop all the balls. The best magicians have rubber wands that break. Kids love it when adults are the ones making the mistakes."

Standing on the sidelines, arms folded like an enlightened Peter Pan, Gelfand appears part pixie-dust entrepreneur, part eagle-eyed marketing whiz -- determined to preserve Neverland for his band of sword swallows, fire eaters and bean-bag jugglers, as well as to make sure everyone eats right. A self-avowed evangelist for the natural-products industry, he's made a second career out of promoting health foods at his shows.

The Buddy Club began in 1987 as an offshoot of the Other Café, the comedy club where Robin Williams, Dana Carvey, Ellen Degeneres and many others rose to fame. Gelfand lived next door to the cafe and played softball with its owners, eventually becoming a partner in the club.

"I had worked with children at the Recreation Center for the Handicapped and loved it. So I started doing research on children's performers and how they make a living, and I realized birthday parties, libraries and schools were their only venues."

So he started putting on monthly Sunday morning shows for kids at the Other Café, substituting popcorn and juice boxes for the two-drink minimum.

"It was exciting to be able to offer this famous, beautiful stage to magicians, ventriloquists, jugglers and acrobats," Gelfand recalls. "My goal all along was for parents to enjoy a live performance with their children. When you have adults and kids going 'wow' at a magic trick, sharing that moment, they get to see their child in a whole different light."

In 1990, when the Other Café moved to Emeryville, the Buddy Club went with it. Two years later, Gelfand bowed out of the comedy scene and began producing children's shows full time.

These days, he and his wife, Beth, oversee 35 weekend shows a year, a schedule that allows Gelfand the luxury of being a stay-at-home dad to daughters Rose, 8, and Talia, 5.

"I feel unbelievably grateful and privileged to do what I do," he says. "I'm in the fun business. All I see all day is people having a happy time. And I get to be home and raise my kids. It's a dream scenario."

The Buddy Club presents shows Sundays from October to April at the Randall Museum Theater, Centerstage Theater in Marin, and the Berkeley JCC Theater. For the club's 20th anniversary, families are invited to Fan Appreciation Day today at the Randall Museum. It's an all-day celebration with free performances and workshops, face painting, stilt walking, balloon sculpting and other activities. 11 a.m.- 4 p.m. 199 MuseumWay at Roosevelt Way. www.thebuddyclub.com.

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