

Lacklander leaves listeners laughing

by April Blumer
37th Training Wing Public Affairs Office

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From MySpace to the old-school Air Force bike test to behavior-modifying 341s, no topic is safe from comic and family man, Staff Sgt. Walter Campbell.

"Everything in life, everything I see, is funny," the 32-year-old assigned to the 345th Training Squadron said with animated hands. "Take budget cuts. The Air Force should have enough money because we didn't spend much on material for the PT shorts."

He pauses; eyebrows lifted as if allowing a moment to let you fully digest the cost-saving benefits associated with the new, shorter, physical training shorts.

Then, part two.

"Even the Marines are like, 'Wow. Those are short.'"

As an Airman in a joint-military family, a father of three girls and an owner of a West Highland terrier named Scoobi, Sergeant Campbell is proud to declare himself a clean comic.

"I can go into a church venue at 7, then come to an Air Force venue at 8, and then go to the comedy club after midnight where everything is raunchy, and still do my act. I don't have to change (the tone)."

According to Ben Huerta, manager of the Rivercenter Comedy Club in San Antonio, "television clean" comics like Sergeant Campbell face a unique challenge. Their material has to be genuinely clever instead of relying on plebian humor to get laughs.

And, as evidenced by his double punch line joke, Sergeant Campbell excels with clever comedy, making him one of Mr. Huerta's first recommendations when someone's looking for a high-energy, clean, positive entertainer.

"When people call me looking for a comic to speak in a corporate environment, I can personally guarantee them Walt will not offend the crowd," Mr. Huerta said. "And if he does, I guarantee them their money back."

In three years, Mr. Huerta can boast he has never had to refund money from one of Sergeant Campbell's bookings.

The sergeant admits he didn't initially see himself as a comic. However, growing up an only child in a single-parent home in Sacramento, Calif., without any other family near, he soon discovered that being funny was a way to break the ice and make friends.



A fundraising event for the 345th Training Squadron served as a special venue for Staff Sgt. Walter Campbell to entertain the audience with humorous, and sometimes thought-provoking, jests about everything to the phase system in technical schools to the all-encompassing answer, "hooah." Sergeant Campbell, who was the master of ceremonies for the event, is assigned to the 345th TRS. (USAF photo by April Blumer)

In kindergarten, he would entertain his classmates, his first audience, the last five minutes of class every Friday with impressions of characters like Yogi Bear and Boo-Boo Bear.

It would be many years, however, before he earned money for his humor.

One evening in 1992, his friends dared him to take the open mike challenge at a club in Los Angeles.

"I talked about red Kool-Aid and chicken for five minutes and won \$100. Crazy thing is I didn't touch a mic again until I joined the Air Force in 1995. Literally three years later, I went back on stage and did the same jokes about red Kool-Aid and chicken, and got a standing ovation."

Sergeant Campbell's comic library has increased exponentially since then. He has nine working notebooks filled with his thoughts, written in everything from glue to pencil to crayon.

In 2002, while on tour with the Tops In Blue team as a vocalist, dancer and magician, he found himself at the Daytona 500.

"Out of place," reads the charcoal entry in his notebook. "Only other thing black are the tires."

Although he performs on a regular basis - he will be competing Monday evening in the final round of the Funniest Person in South Texas competition at the Rivercenter Comedy Club - Sergeant Campbell claims no lofty illusions of becoming the next Eddie Murphy in this tricky business of comedy.

Yet in the humorous center of his mind's eye, he can hear the lyrics of the rhythm and blues group, "New Edition," getting a packed theater energized. He can visualize Damon Wayans getting the crowd loosened up and in the mood for more. Then, he can picture himself, the headliner, spiritedly leaping on stage, spending the next hour sharing his love of comedy with an audience that laughs at every joke and never boos.

While he will always do comedy, the sergeant asserts he's happy wearing his blues.

And with a grin and a hint of teasing in his eyes, he steadfastly pronounces, "If stardom happens, that'd be awesome. But comedy doesn't come with TRICARE and TSP."

Favorite comedians: Eddie Murphy, Damon Wayans, Robert Townsend, Lenny Bruce, Sinbad, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor

Taboo topic: Religion

Shared the stage with: Sinbad, Mo'Nique and J.Anthony Brown

Accomplishment most proud of: The ability to perform anywhere, anytime for any audience, *clean!*

Best thing about being a comic: To see people laugh at a concept I thought up. To hear that laughter, as a comic, is the ultimate high.

Advice to future comics: Know that one day you are going to fail. They won't laugh. They will boo you. You have to have the courage to get up and try one more time.

Side note: In the military venue, make the commander laugh. If the commander laughs, the rest of the room will, too.