

## N.S. Arc puts 'spotlight' on comedy

By Christine Marmen/Danvers Herald Correspondent  
**GateHouse News Service**

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Danvers —

The Spotlight Program of North Shore Arc is preparing to welcome high-profile comedian Butch Bradley, as well as some of their own talented students, who will perform at their third annual comedy night and silent auction at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, May 13, at Spinelli's Function Facility in Lynnfield.

Founded in the 1950s, the North Shore Arc is a non-profit organization "where people who are challenged succeed," as its literature states. It supports individuals with or at risk for developing disabilities with a variety of individual and family-based support services.

Dr. Karen Levine, Ph.D., started the Spotlight Program in 2004 with Director Matthew Lerner. Originally designed for students with Asperger's Syndrome or Autism, they have welcomed participation by students who wish to benefit from the drama and activities-based program, no diagnosis necessary. Approximately 240 students who have been interviewed to determine proper group placement participate during after school and weekend programs with about 80 students in each of three semesters. Many also return for summer camp.

Brian Gordon, director of the Spotlight Program for the last two years, brings a unique understanding and perspective to his work. As a stand-up comedian who toured for 10 years before deciding to step back in search of something more meaningful, he found working with children with disabilities to be the missing piece.

"You had to have been someone who's gone through transition to work with kids going through transition," said Gordon.

After Gordon's first position with Arc of East Middlesex as a school-to-work vocational specialist working with young adults, he realized that individuals wouldn't enjoy getting a job unless they could enjoy workplace culture. Recognizing the importance of cultivating these skills from a younger age, taking on the director's role for the Spotlight Program based out of the Southside Road, Danvers, facility was an opportunity he embraced. Gordon still, however, continues to work privately with one of his former students.

Gordon attended the first Spotlight Program comedy night two years ago and was most impressed by the students who performed.

"The kids were so brilliant. They didn't even need the comedians," said Gordon. "They're amazing, and the point of the Spotlight Program is to showcase that ability."

Gordon, who invited friend Gary Gulman, a comedian who appeared in seasons two and three of NBC's "The Last Comic Standing," to perform at last year's event is thrilled to welcome another good friend, Bradley, to perform next Wednesday.

"I get to bring comedians I love, and they get to see what I do," said Gordon, who incidentally appeared in an opening scene of "The Last Comic Standing" as a contestant who almost made it onto the show.

Bradley, who has performed in comedy clubs through the U.S., U.K. and Japan, as well as on the U.S.O comedy tour for troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, may be most recognizable from his appearances on Comedy Central, HBO, "Last Call" with Carson Daly, "The Late, Late Show" with Craig Ferguson and his current role as a cast member on "The Tony Rock Project," airing on Fox.

Bradley will share the stage with about eight Spotlight Program all-stars who will share their comedy, improvisational, vocal and acting talents. Gordon, who plans to play back-up guitar for the vocal performances, will address the crowd during the evening with the intent to express his gratitude to parents and all who have supported and believed in the value of the program, even during difficult economic times.

"Lots of people have been very generous," said Gordon of the many auction item contributions, which include Red Sox tickets and signed ball as well as beautiful quilts made by students.

Gordon, drawing parallels between his comedic work and how those skills benefit students, says the program is a great opportunity for kids to feel wonderful and safe.

"Comedians are natural social decoders. There are always 50 sides to every story. Most of these kids are more rigid in their rules. Improv is learning to see the gray. Our job is to expand the number of variables they take in," said Gordon, who wishes to impart the value of laughing about oneself, as he did as a comedian, rather than striving for the notion of "perfection."

Another goal of the program is to help students recognize and understand someone else's perspective. The performance-based techniques and dramatic training offered as part of the curriculum support this objective.

Lead Provider Sharane Connell has enjoyed working with students during the school year as well as during summer camp.

"I love the creative side of my job. I get to engage the students in the most interesting ways," said Connell, appreciating the freedom to try different things and make adjustments based on need. Among other projects, Connell has helped students make their own movies.

"You can't put a cap on potential. To be a good comedian is to say yes to everything," said Gordon, a philosophy that translates into his current work. Gordon, who views his life path to the North Shore Arc's Spotlight Program as serendipitous, likens his job to working with saints. "It's not are they worthy of us; it's like, are we worthy of them?"

**Interested?**

3rd Annual Comedy Night and Silent Auction

Wednesday, May 13, 6:30 p.m.  
Spinelli's Function Facility  
Route 1, Lynnfield  
Tickets \$50  
To reserve ticket, make donation or learn more: visit [www.spotlightprogram.com](http://www.spotlightprogram.com)

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