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Rochester Hills woman creates club for people who like to laugh

BY SHARON DARGAY
COMMUNITY LIFE EDITOR

"Tonight, we're going to be silly."

Dr. Beth Mercado kept her promise, leading participants through two hours of singing, stomping, swaying and mostly giggling and guffawing at a recent laugh workshop in a basement meeting room at Unity Church, Rochester.

Before it was half over, the dozen mostly female participants said the session made them feel everything from peaceful, invigorated, relaxed to joyful.

Mercado couldn't have hoped for more.

And when some of them said they wanted to laugh a lot more often, Mercado agreed to start a club.

"So a Joy Laughter Club, the first I believe in the area, is on," she noted. "The only qualification is that the person be open to laughter and fun."

No meeting date or time has been set, but anyone interested in joining the club can call the church at (248) 656-0120.

The Rochester Hills resident holds a Ph.D. in psychology from the California Institute for Human Science (2000) and is certified by the World Laughter Tour Inc. to teach its combination of laughter and breathing exercises that stem from the laughter yoga work pioneered in India 11 years ago by Dr. Madan Kataria. Mercado, who also led laughter workshops in Florida before moving to Michigan, where she also is involved in real estate and development through a family business, Mercado Properties, LLC.

LAUGHTER MOVEMENT

Although the positive use of laughter dates back thousands of years to Tibetan Buddhist practices, Norman Cousins's book, *Anatomy of an Illness As Perceived by the Patient*, gave the humor and laugh movement a major boost. In his 1979 book, Cousins describes how using the power of laughter -- by locking himself in a hotel room and watching silly movies -- along with high doses of vitamin C, sent a life-threatening disease into remission. Kataria, a family physician working in Mumbai, India, was inspired by the book and by research work being done at Loma Linda University in California.

"He started with five people just getting them together to laugh," Mercado noted. "So, they cracked jokes and they laughed. But then he ran out of jokes. So what this guy did was exercises."

And that's just what Mercado did in her laugh workshop.

The group first "lightened up" by singing, dancing in place and introducing themselves.

"Life is too serious to be serious about it," Mercado told them, adding that while children laugh roughly "400 times a day," adults only do it about 15 times a day.

"Laughter is contagious. When I look at you and I see you laughing, I laugh, too. I laugh without any reason, just because you're laughing. Just let the child inside come out and play."

SIMULATING LAUGHTER

Mercado brought out a whistle -- used for signaling the end of a laugh sequence -- and led the group through a series of exercises. Many included a cue, such as "Aloha," or "Namaste," that easily sparked the sound "ha ha ha." After every few laughing sequences, group members simply would breathe.

"Where ever there is a pain in your body, put it on the ground and stomp on it ... ha ha ha ha ha," Mercado demonstrated, jumping in place while laughing.

She also pointed out that although the exercises spark simulated laughter, the movement and sound often gives way to genuine laughter.

"Simulated laughter is stimulated laughter," she said. "Maybe some of you think you won't be able to laugh because it's fake, but it is stimulated laughter. So whenever you are out there just be silly and other people will be silly, too.

"There is a little child in all of us that is longing to come out and play."

Nancy Redilla of Troy saw the workshop as an antidote to stress.

"My mother was my mentor. She had cancer but she just knew that laughter was the best medicine," Redilla noted, adding that the laughter exercises were "wonderful."

Bea Rogers, minister's assistant at the church, said laughter takes people out of their comfort zones.

"We get so stoic, especially church people. I think this was great. And the health benefits are great."
