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Loaded with laughter

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“Ho-Ho-Ha-Ha.”

That is the vocal warmup that launched the St. Cloud State University Laughter Club on Thursday afternoon.

Laughter Club is a worldwide movement that got its start in India. Now, there are Laughter Clubs throughout Western countries.

Two professors in the university’s special education department inspired President Donna Stromquist to start the local club.

Julia Wilkins and Jerry Wellik spent two days with the World Laughter Tour in North Carolina to become certified laughter leaders.

“The therapy value of laughter, and how it is contagious, can be shared across all cultures and all languages. I thought, what a prospect to share with students in the university,” Stromquist said.

Laughter Club meetings are interactive. They start with a vocal and a physical warm-up.

“You laugh with each other, not laugh at each other,” Wellik told the group gathered in a circle Thursday.

He and Wilkins demonstrated the “ho-ho-ha-ha” chain and the group copied them. They added eye contact and then invited people to smile at one another. Next came clapping, and then a little dance.

Club members practice greeting laughter at each meeting. Greeting laughter is an action that mocks common actions in daily life. Wilkins and Wellik demonstrated the hot sand greeting, in which people have to act like they are walking on the hot sand and, at the same time, greet others. They tried several other greetings, such as Hawaiian greeting, tea party greeting and the ice cube on the back greeting.

Membership in the Laughter Club is open to anyone. For now it includes a custodian, an associate dean, an international student, students, faculty and staff members.

The group already is thinking about expanding, Stromquist said.

“What we would like to do eventually is branch out into the community,” Wilkins said. “We are going to begin on campus, until we got a lot of people coming together. Then we want to get those people to go out into the community (to) nursing homes or elementary schools and high schools.”



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St. Cloud State Laughter Club president Donna Stromquist participates in a laughter exercise.

Luz Triana-Echeverria, who teaches Spanish at the university, said she came to the meeting to learn to relax. She wants to take life easier.

“I think there is a lot of positive energy,” said Anna Larson, a graduate student.

Laughter is a way to break down barriers, Wilkins said.

“(It) has the same meaning to everyone across the world. It is a way to bring every people together, if you don’t speak the same language,” she said.

Wilkins and Wellik provide some guidelines to help members create what they call a “week of joy.”

Monday is the day of compliments. Making someone feel good can make you feel good, they say. Tuesday is the day of flexibility. Do something out of your routine. Wednesday is a day of gratitude. People should feel good about what they have and stop comparing. Thursday is a day of kindness. Do something good behind someone’s back. Friday is a day of forgiveness. Don’t sweat the little things. Forgiveness is the core of many relationships, Wellik said.

The weekend days are the days of chocolate. That means a day to do something fun for yourself. It is kind of self-indulgent, Wilkins said.

“We can’t change other people’s behavior, but we can change how we react and interact with others in our environment, and that in some way could change their behavior,” Stormquist said.

It is about training, and training to change your life and others, she said.

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