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Pun-off: Good for Aging Bodies and Minds

By Carol Harrison

Wordplay games are hard enough to do in private, but on stage, in competition and under the clock?

A largely boomers and beyond crowd is expected to either test its wordplay skills under pressure or laugh and groan as others do in the 23rd rendition of the Pun-off on Saturday, March 1 in the Arcata Theatre Lounge.

“Some years, we have to turn people away,” said Jeffrey Smoller, the soon-to-be 60-year-old who teamed with Lorna McCleod to found the Pun-off in 1977. He took home the first Puntiff title, and then repeated in 1994. Today, he plays guitar in the Sound Judgment band that accompanies the punning contestants.

“We are known for home-groan fun, and we guarantee to deliver disappointment, though your actual nausea may vary,” he said.

“It’s about 50-50 laughter and groans, but it’s an appreciative groan,” said two-time champion David Schlosser, now one of three judges.

Admission is \$16 at the door, which opens at 7:30 p.m. Contestants come from those who show up and then register at the stage. The Pun-off begins at 8 p.m.

The emcee – for the first time a woman, Carol Escobar – picks a category out of a hat. Competitors line up and are put in groups of three, then pun on the subject until only one of the three remains to advance to the next round.

The pun must be in a complete sentence, must start within an allotted time, and cannot be a repeat of the contestants before.

“Let’s say the subject is trees,” Smoller said. “The first person might say, ‘I have to leaf.’ The next one may say, ‘You have me stumped.’ It goes round and round. It’s more of a quick and quantity situation than quality.”

“It is a survival contest,” Schlosser said. “We don’t judge whether it’s a good pun or bad pun. Just that it’s valid.”

The occasional gem is long remembered.

“Dr. Scott Sattler, my doctor and one of A1AA’s former board members, got the topic of college classes,” Smoller said. “He told us he knew someone in his class who cooked, happened to be of Portuguese descent and had a specialty in linguistics. The audience howled.”

It appreciated Schlosser's electricity pun, too, as he'd been 'fil-a-mints' after consuming too many free after dinner sweets.

"It can even be one word if it works," Schlosser said. "Rocks and minerals was the topic. Rick St. Charles got up, looked at his watch and said, 'Slate.'

The judges include the event's only three-time winner, Dr. Luther Cobb and Cindy Denbo, a retired librarian, the Pun-off's grammarian and former executive director of Area 1 Agency on Aging. The Northern California Community Blood Bank's John Gullam is back for his second year as the official timer.

"It was impressive," the 48-year-old Gullam said. "Folks have to come up with something out of nowhere and depending on the situation they might be third or fourth in line. It's amazing to watch them pull stuff from every genre. Historical, literary references . . . it just goes on and on. The subjects change, but they keep coming up with stuff and it's all funny."

Smoller said the stalls and stories can be as much fun as the puns.

"You never know who is going to win," he said. "One year, the piano player in the band entered halfway into it and won. The worst that happens is you lose or sit down. It's a great inducement to compete."

For the second year in a row, proceeds benefit the Making Headway Center for Brain Injury Recovery.

"Brain injury recovery, wordplay and the Pun-off went together well," said Smoller, who works in community development for Making Headway. "If you can do different things with words – crossword puzzles, wordplay – you are way ahead in the dementia game because you are keeping your brain active. "

As for laughter, Smoller said it's one of the best medicines. Research backs him up. The Harvard Medical School's HelpGuide.org says laughter relaxes muscles, relieves tension, decreases stress hormones, boosts the immune system and improves circulation to protect from heart attack and other cardiovascular problems.

Also, University of Texas researchers studied 17 adults who chose to watch either a half-hour comedy or documentary. Measures of artery function and flexibility improved immediately in those who watched the comedy and stayed that way for almost 24 hours.

"Improved circulation means more oxygen to the brain. That keeps us sharp and may even delay the onset of dementia," Smoller said. "Laughter is good for everyone, but it may be even more valuable to those over 50 as that's when some heart and cardiovascular problems start to show up."

Regardless of the health benefits, the boomer and beyond crowd has responded to the event. Through the years, Smoller said 60 to 70 percent of the audience is over 50.

"The older crowd remembers the movies and comics that did a lot of wordplay, especially the Marx Brothers, Duck Soup antiwar movies, Jack Benny and George Carlin," he said. "They had more puns per

minute than you can possibly imagine, and Carlin never stopped. A lot of younger people now, they just don't get it. Boomers and older . . . they love it."

But last year marked a change as the two finalists were in their twenties.

"A whole bunch of youth just showed up to compete and cheer on friends," Smoller said.

"We even had a couple of little kids, 10 or 11," Gullam recalled. "I don't know that I could ever stand there in the spotlight, but if you're curious, come see. It was a good time."

"The competitors tend to be over 50 or under 15," Smoller said. "Wordplay requires a lack of inhibition and those age groups aren't worried about what people think. Middle-aged folks are too uptight."

As the event has grown – it topped out at over 600 attendees and 21 participants – advancing years have proven to be a competitive advantage.

"Older people have much more command of the language and life experience to draw from," Smoller said.

Case in point: Jack Hanrahan.

"He used to write for Rowan & Martin's Laugh-in," Smoller said. "He was in his 80s when he was competing. He even dressed up as a sorcerer. He didn't place, but he was hilarious and had fun."

Area 1 Agency on Aging paid Carol Harrison to write this article and will send its director, Maggie Kraft, into the competition. For more information about Making Headway and its effort to prevent and care for brain injuries, call 442-7668.