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Carrboro's DSI Comedy starts new improv class aimed at middle school girls

By [Faith McElroy and Kathryn Muller](#) | The Daily Tar Heel
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DSI Comedy Theater has a new student demographic — middle school girls.

The Carrboro-based theater is offering a new improvisation class called IMPOWER, designed for girls between the ages of 11 and 14.

The class — which had its first session Tuesday night — has two 6th graders, two 8th graders and a 9th grader. It was scheduled to begin Sept. 20 but was pushed back because of low registration numbers, said Sarah Eldred, creator and instructor of IMPOWER.

The girls, all at different levels of experience, spent the first few minutes of the class in silence.

But the first game — a name game called “Superhero” — immediately brought every girl out of her shell.

By the end of class, each girl had let out her most bloodcurdling scream and showed off her gangster rapper imitation.

“I love that we got to scream and run around in circles,” one student, an 8th grader named Jermisha Balwin, said.

Eldred said she started improv at DSI as a high school student in 2005.

After she returned in 2009 from four years at Salem College in Winston-Salem, she wanted to start a class aimed at young women.

“Comedy as a field is heavily male dominated,” she said.

“I wanted to create a space where girls could feel comfortable.”

She chose middle school-age girls, hoping to start developing their comedic confidence while they’re young and keep them involved with comedy as they age.

Zach Ward, executive producer of DSI, said he has noticed far fewer girls than boys take the summer class offered for young students.

“A lot of middle school girls are very excited about improv, but unfortunately this is the age where things like self-awareness and judgment start to set in,” Ward said.

Paula Pazderka, artistic director and school manager of DSI said she, too, noticed the disparity.

“I want more ladies to enjoy the benefits of improv,” she wrote in an email. “I want more ladies to be comedians.”

Pazderka knows the benefits of an all-female improv environment first hand.

While performing with an all-female comedy team in Chicago, Pazderka said she not only became a better comedian, but was also able to break free from female roles.

“When you are on an all-female team you aren’t pigeon-holed into being the wife, little sister or mom,” she wrote in an email. “You are every character of every gender.”

Ward said improv and stand-up comedy are under-served outlets for young girls.

He said IMPOWER gives girls an opportunity to get on stage — without boys watching — and feel totally secure.

“At this age the same dynamics that set girls and boys apart in the classroom happen on stage,” he said.

The class is driven by Eldred’s mission to make all the girls feel comfortable with themselves and with their own humor.

“I like to feel cool, so at the end of anything we all clap,” Eldred said.

Contact the Arts Editor at arts@dailytarheel.com.

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