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HAPPY TRAILS

Two filmmakers are on a mission to find the happiest people in America.

by Chris Libby



Adam Shell, *Pigs in a Blank*; Kate, *Nicholas Kraft*; and *Spicy Mustard Mandy* in Valencia, Calif.

We hear a lot about finding happiness, but it's not every day that you hear about an actual pursuit. Meet Adam Shell and Nicholas Kraft, two filmmakers who are traveling coast to coast to find the happiest people. The idea for their latest documentary, *Pursuing Happiness*, stemmed from Adam's

previous film, *Finding Kraftland*. He followed Hollywood film music agent Richard Kraft and his son, Nicholas, on a worldwide quest to get as much joy and excitement out of life as possible. Overwhelmingly positive feedback from film festival screenings of *Finding Kraftland* inspired their next venture.

"I made a film that's actually inspiring people to find happiness.

Doing things and having the attitude of being happy were always something of high importance to me," Adam says. "I wanted to see if I could actually spread more happiness and inspire people to think about their own happiness."

In *Pursuing Happiness*, Adam and Nicholas talk to psychologists, researchers, theologians and, more important, everyday people, to find out as much as they can about happiness. There has been no shortage of people to interview. Somebody knows someone who is the happiest person they know. From time to time they find themselves in a town where they don't know a soul. Then they start talking to strangers.

"It's not about the happiest place in America. The real focus is to find a wide variety from different parts of the country," Nicholas says. "Part of it is to capture those differences and part of it is to show what unites us."

The most frequently asked question when people discover the scope of their project is, "What is the secret?" Since happiness means different things to different people, there isn't a single answer. And while their journey is far from over, they are starting to see a trend: Happier people usually come from stronger communities. "It always comes down to community and connecting with people, and that's where we have definitely found the happiest people in the tightest communities," Adam says.

"We are pack animals. And as a pack, we are strong; as individuals we are weak," Adam explains. "The idea

“I wanted to see if I could actually spread more happiness and inspire people to think about their own happiness.”

—Adam Shell

of sharing is the utmost idea in the history of humanity, right? Because when you share, that strengthens the community, and when you strengthen the community, your chances of survival improve.”

The most encouraging aspect to this project is that the secret to happiness seems to be no secret at all. There is no unattainable grail. Everything about being happy has already been said.

“Which is not to say that there isn’t a lot to understand,” Nicholas points out. “It is kind of like music. There are only 12 notes and people are still composing music with those 12 notes. I think there are only a limited number of things that really contribute to happiness, and those are things that we already know.”



ON THE WEB

Watch an exclusive preview of *Pursuing Happiness* on March 20 at livehappy.com

Satisfaction with Life Scale

How satisfied are you with your life?



The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), developed by Gallup Senior Scientist Ed Diener, is structured to

assess the broad scope of satisfaction with your life.

The scale consists of five statements, the first three dealing with the present and the last two dealing with the past, for you to strongly agree or strongly disagree with:

1. In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.
2. The conditions of my life are excellent.
3. I am completely satisfied with my life.
4. So far I have gotten the most important things I want in life.
5. If I could live my life over, I would change nothing.

It only takes a few minutes of your time; depending how you answer, the results should give you a good sense of how things are going in your life as a whole. There are many factors that go into how we view satisfaction. People who score high on the scale generally have positive social relationships with family and friends, meaningful accomplishments and strong personal growth. People who score lower on



the scale may not be happy with how things are currently going. They may have an unfulfilling career path or haven’t surrounded themselves with enough people who care about them. Temporary dissatisfaction, as Ed points out, is common and in some cases, even motivating. It may be time to reflect and make the necessary changes to improve your life if the dissatisfaction persists.

The SWLS, among many other questionnaires, can be found at www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu. It has been translated into many different languages and has been used in hundreds of studies to give researchers a global understanding of life satisfaction.

Who Prays?

A whopping 75 percent of us pray at least weekly, while 58 percent pray every day, according to a study from the Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project.

What’s more, a second study reveals that even among those who say they believe in “nothing in particular,” or classify themselves as agnostic or atheist, an amazing 21 percent say they pray every day.

inspired!

JIM CARREY'S NEW 'ROLL'

Inspired by his own childhood fears, Jim Carrey aims to ease the worry that children have about loss with his new book, *How Roland Rolls*.

Telling the tale of a wave named Roland who is afraid his life will end once he hits the beach, the first-time author uses the ocean as a metaphor for life. Jim hopes this book will teach children that we never end—we just change.


Throughout his career, he has told countless stories and played many characters, but none may be more fulfilling to him than his latest character, Roland. With the help of Roland, Jim wanted to take this heavy burden of a topic and present it in a way that gives people relief.

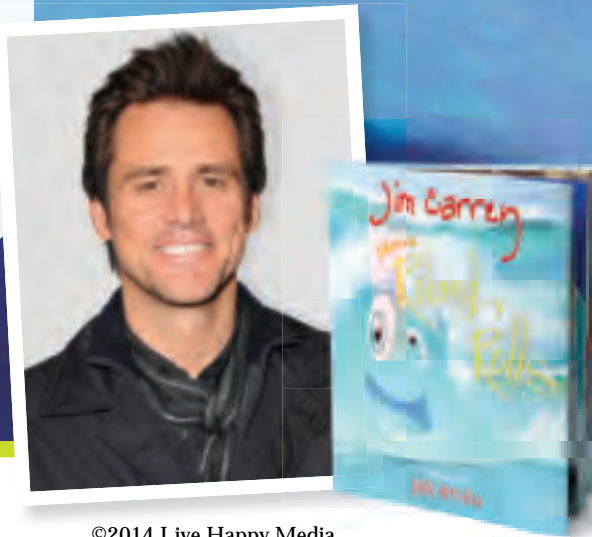
"That's what I am about, that's my job," he says. "It's been my job my whole life. My ministry is to free people from concern."

Illustrated by award-winning artist and animator R.C. Nason, *How Roland Rolls* presents Jim's philosophy in a succinct, innocent way that is easy for children to understand, and maybe the parents can take something from it, too.

In the end, Roland realizes that he is part of something bigger. From a small raindrop to a vast ocean, he is still connected to everything, and he is still here.

And just like with every bedtime story we tell our children, we are safe, we are secure and good triumphs once again.

Jim's wacky faces were the inspiration for R.C.'s illustrations of Roland. Check out HowRolandRolls.com/facing-roland and send in your own Roland face. 





WHY A SENSE OF HUMOR MAY BE THE MOST EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TOOL FOR YOUR WELL-BEING.

by Chris Libby illustrations by Chris Pyle

What do you get when you put an introverted mechanical engineering student on a stage telling jokes in front of 150 people for 10 minutes? For Nick Seymour, a senior at Iowa State University, it was sheer perspiration-infused terror.

"Being on stage was one of my biggest fears," says Nick, whose worst subject in high school was speech class. "I am this boring guy who sits in the corner and works on math." So how did that guy find himself here, microphone in hand, sweating it out in front of a huge crowd?

Nick's performance was the final in his honors Comedy College course taught by professional comedian and instructor Gavin Jerome along with ISU economics professor Peter Orazem. Nick signed up for the class to work on his interpersonal skills. Throughout the semester, Nick and other fellow future engineers, mathematicians, psychologists and business leaders learned how to craft and write jokes, bounce ideas off each other, work the crowd and, at the end of the course, showcased their efforts in front of a live audience.

The goal of the class is not to learn how to be a professional comedian, although Peter and Gavin agree that a few students have been good enough to make a living doing it, but rather an opportunity to

use comedy and humor to learn life lessons such as how to overcome fears of public speaking, build confidence and improve communication.

Not everyone is a natural comedian. In fact, most of us aren't. But, just like any skill, the use of humor and other techniques used in performing comedy or having a comedic mindset can be strengthened with practice and are useful in almost any social situation.

"If you want to work in a team environment and get along with your co-workers, then a sense of humor and comedy training make you more likable and able to create rapport, reduce tension, facilitate communication and increase cooperation," Gavin says.

The World Is a Stage

If we are shy turtles, humor can coax us out of our shells. If we are trying to break the ice with others, making people laugh can relieve stress and make awkward situations less so. Laughter and humor are ways to strengthen our bonds socially, improve relationships, lower stress and let down

our negativity guards to say, "OK, this is a safe space."

Psychologist Brian King, Ph.D., author of the book *The Laughing Cure: Emotional and Physical Healing—A Comedian Reveals Why Laughter Is the Best Medicine*, says when someone is laughing with you, your brain signals that this person is most likely not out to harm you.

"So many people fear public speaking more than anything else," he

says. And when we have success and the audience is engaging, we are overcoming a tremendous amount of anxiety and that can be thrilling. Brian should know, because although he has been a professor and is no stranger to public speaking, he is also a working comedian who still gets nervous when performing. He knows just what kind of pressure Nick is dealing with up on that stage.

"The anxiety that is produced is almost relieved immediately by the

PHOTOGRAPHS: LEFT, ©BOB ELBERT/IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY; BELOW, ©CHRISTOPHER GANNON/IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

PHOTOGRAPHS: ©MICHAEL SCHWARTZ/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES



Life Less Serious

Humor is arguably one of the most infectious character strengths we possess and can have

extremely positive benefits to our own well-being as well as to those around us. The VIA Institute on Character describes humor as "playfulness" and "bringing smiles to others."

Laughter unleashes all kinds of happy stuff into our bodies, like oxytocin. As with any habit, the more we practice, the more our brains accept it and make it a regular part of our lives.

"Laughter is the verbalization of happiness," says comedian and happiness expert Yakov Smirnoff. "So if it's a healthy laugh, not nervous laughter, but a healthy, mirthful laugh, it is triggered by humor."

Yakov has been a professional comedian since the 1980s. He often played the role of a Russian immigrant mesmerized by modern culture in the United States with one-liners including his popular catch phrase, "What a country!"

After spending decades making people laugh, he wanted to find the connection between laughter and happiness, especially as it relates to relationships. He is a recent graduate of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program from the University of Pennsylvania and is working toward his doctorate of education in organizational leadership at Pepperdine University in California.

"In the beginning of the relationship, we will do whatever it takes; that's how we get to be in a relationship. But after that, we relax and stop doing that," he says. "When happiness dies, that's when laughter dies."

He believes that couples can use laughter as a canary in a coal mine—an early detector to gauge how the relationship is going. If things aren't funny anymore, it may be time to take an assessment and see if each other's needs are being met. "Laughter is the first thing to go. The second is intimacy and the third is your house. In that order," Yakov jokes. "So if you want to keep your house, keep creating laughter."



LISTEN TO OUR INTERVIEW
WITH YAKOV SMIRNOFF ON
LIVEHAPPYNOW.COM.



INSET: ECONOMICS PROFESSOR PETER ORAZEM NOT ONLY CO-TEACHES THE COMEDY COLLEGE HONORS COURSE AT IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY, BUT PERFORMS STAND-UP OFF CAMPUS AS WELL. ABOVE: STUDENT ERIC LACY PRACTICES HIS MATERIAL IN FRONT OF PETER ORAZEM AND THE REST OF THE CLASS. RIGHT: ISU STUDENTS NICK SEYMOUR AND RACHEL REYES THROW ZINGERS DURING CLASS.

response of laughter,” he says. “The audience is putting you at ease and saying, ‘Look, we are not going to hurt you and you are OK.’ But until you get that first laugh, it can be nerve-racking.”

It was toward the end of his final set when Nick realized for the first time that he was killing it. “For the first seven minutes I was terrified. I really didn’t want to be up there. It is way out of my comfort zone,” he says. “The last three minutes, I hit on a joke that was pretty funny and from there I ran with it.”

Reviewing his performance video, he can see the moment when he connects with the audience. There’s a shift in his facial expressions from fear to commanding control of the crowd. “I get really animated and I just go crazy on stage. That was the point when I realized that I have to keep doing this. I have to keep doing comedy, and I have to keep working on stage, working on my public speaking skills. It has been spectacular for me.”

Brian feels that same passion. Learning stand-up comedy “has made me a much more effective and comfortable public speaker,” he says.

“There are skills that you learn on a comedy stage that really can’t even be articulated, like how to handle yourself emotionally to ways to think about what you are saying and at the same moment pick up on cues being fed to you from the audience.”

When the performer is in sync with the audience, everyone benefits. “There is traditional wisdom with public speaking to open with a joke,” Brian says. “It doesn’t matter what you are talking about, it is such a good rule of thumb.”

Communicating Through Comedy

Peter, who helped facilitate the Comedy College course at ISU, was also once a student of Gavin’s. He now finds joy in performing comedy as a hobby, but also credits it for improving his speaking and writing skills.

“There is nothing more scary than taking something you have written that you think might be funny but you are not sure, and getting up in front of people and having to deliver,” Peter says. “Or knowing that if you have something that bombs, you have to get

to the next joke to make up for it. It’s a scary thing, but if you are comfortable with that, then there is not a whole lot that you can’t do.”

Peter says great communicators work backward from the message, and in comedy the punchline is the message. When we develop what we want to say, we want to deliver the message as efficiently as possible, whether it is in a boardroom, speaking in public or at a business meeting. “You want to get to the conclusion as quickly and as efficiently as possible, and it has to be understandable to as many people as possible so they are not scratching their heads as to what is the relationship between the setup and the payoff.”

Before the course, Nick felt he was lacking in communication skills and certain social protocols in his engineering courses. “They teach you how to do the calculations but they don’t teach you the person-to-person interaction,” Nick says. “I saw so much improvement in my personal skills (after the class); interviews have gone tremendously better. I’ve gotten a ton more interviews because of this. It is easier to talk to people; it’s a lot easier to do presentations.”

Wacky at Work

Iowa State isn’t the only U.S. college to use unconventional practices of comedy when preparing students for life. The Neeley School of Business at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas, recently named a local improv comedy troupe, Four Day Weekend, as its Entrepreneur-in-Residence.

Through workshops and lectures, Four Day Weekend is now teaching its “Yes, and...” philosophy to business students, a first for a comedy troupe in the school’s history. The “Yes, and...” approach is standard practice in improvisational comedy and theater. The idea is to completely listen to your partner onstage and not judge or react until they are done. Not knowing what they are going to say, you have to agree to build upon that idea. If everyone



ABOVE: COMEDY IMPROV TROUPE FOUR DAY WEEKEND FROM FORT WORTH, TEXAS, HELPS ENTREPRENEURS FIND MEANINGFUL AND SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS STRATEGIES WITH THEIR “YES, AND...” PHILOSOPHY.



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF FOUR DAY WEEKEND



DOWNLOAD OUR DIGITAL EDITION FOR MORE
—MEDICAL SCHOOL PROFESSOR PUTS HUMOR TO WORK.
—WHEN YOU LAUGH, YOUR ENTIRE BRAIN IS IN ON THE JOKE.

“PART OF ANY COMMUNITY IS LEARNING TO LAUGH WITH EACH OTHER AND LEARNING TO CELEBRATE EACH OTHER AS PEOPLE, AND HUMOR IS ONE OF THOSE VEHICLES THAT DOES THAT.”
—Homer Erikson, Ph.D.



Gavin Jerome's Practical Applications

DEVELOP A GOOD SENSE OF HUMOR. Whether you're negotiating, presenting ideas, interviewing or just walking into a stressful situation, humor is a vital communication tool for every businessperson.

THINK ON YOUR FEET. A good comic will be able to run hundreds of ideas through his or her brain in a matter of seconds. This shows confidence and calm, and it is a major trait of leadership to be able to reframe and reposition on the fly with humor. It's also an important self-defense skill.

BRING LIGHT TO DARKNESS. Humor is life's shock absorber. So many things will go wrong in your life, and you can either laugh or cry. If you can laugh at it, you can live with it. If you can find humor in any situation, you can survive it. It can be your most important life tool in surviving tough times.

agrees to the rules, then the activity is free to go anywhere while creativity and hilarity ensues.

Homer Erikson, Ph.D., dean and professor of managerial economics and strategy at TCU, says the philosophy is a good fit for the Neeley School of Business because of the messages of innovation, inclusion and hope. “Part of any community is learning to laugh with each other and learning to celebrate each other as people, and humor is one of those vehicles that does that,” Homer says. “It is a community builder. The best communities are the ones that not only do great work but learn to laugh together.”

David Wilk, co-founder of Four Day Weekend and co-author of the book *Happy Accidents*, set for release this fall, has gone from a struggling comedian to, decades later, performing for U.S. Congress and meeting two presidents just by saying “yes.” “We started out bitter stand-up comics who weren't that successful, and we switched to improvisation and ‘Yes, and...’ and started building everyone up around

us instead of tearing everything down,” David says. “And our business, our careers, our lives, everything around us just flourished.”

Gordon Bermant, a lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania's psychology department, concludes in his opinion piece in the 2013 journal *Frontiers in Psychology* that the most important component to improv is the “Yes, and...” philosophy because of its “unambiguous and complete support of performing partners for each other.” Because of the use of spontaneity, players can also get lost in a flow state where creativity explodes in the present moment and real bonds of trust can be formed. He equates these actions to the concept of unconditional positive regard (UPR), developed by psychologist Carl Rogers, in which acceptance of a person's behavior is wholly supported without judgment.

“Your idea becomes our idea and we both have buy in,” David says. “If we all do our jobs, we all look good. And what we have found is that we are far more

productive and creative collectively than we are individually.”

Four Day Weekend performs for businesses and corporations across the country, delivering their message of “no idea is a bad idea.” “Yes, and...” is a philosophy, David says. “It is a retooling of the brain to be more cognizant and accepting of others' ideas and living in this state of adaptability.”

That's not to say it works for every situation. “I'm a father of two boys,” he says. “If they came to me and asked to play in the street, I wouldn't say, ‘Yes, and...wear camouflage.’”

Funny Is As Funny Does

In the January 2011 journal *Communication Education*, a four-decade study on the use of humor in the classroom found that comedy can create a positive environment for learning, “soften” critiques and even help with social cohesiveness. Even bad news may not be so bad when told with a joke.

Before taking his comedy class, Nick attended a career fair and did not receive a single offer. After completing

the course, he got six internship offers. He also now views life differently. He approaches every day with humor and remembers to not take things too seriously. “Life is fun and games if you let it be.”

Nick and a few of his Comedy College classmates have started their own comedy club, performing in local venues in Ames, Iowa, and nearby Des Moines. He has been pushed fully outside his comfort zone and is loving every minute of it.

“The best advice I can give to anyone looking at a program like this, is just do it. There is nothing bad that will come out of it. What else would you rather spend your time on? Is watching Netflix going to make you a better person? This certainly will.”

Brian concurs. He says, “Every time I get off a stage, I feel an ecstatic sense of well-being and it's great. There are few things better than making a room full of people laugh.” 🙌

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOP: ©RAMPKEL/SHUTTERSTOCK; LEFT: COURTESY OF GAVIN JEROME

A LIFE LESS COMPLICATED

It's the simple things that make actor Michael Emerson happy.

by Chris Libby

From the unforgettable and enigmatic Benjamin Linus on *Lost* to the equally mysterious billionaire tech genius Harold Finch in *Person of Interest*, Emmy Award-winning actor Michael Emerson has a knack for playing characters that keep audiences engaged. Michael's life off-screen is not nearly as complicated. He enjoys quiet days with his wife, actress Carrie Preston, and walks with their dog, Chumley.

WHO HAS TAUGHT YOU THE MOST ABOUT HAPPINESS AND WHY?

Children, dogs and people over the age of 75, because they aren't trying to do too much except be in and enjoy the present moment.

WHEN IS THE LAST TIME YOU LAUGHED OUT LOUD?

Sometime during the last (and EVERY) chapter of *The Inimitable Jeeves* by P. G. Wodehouse, which I am currently reading.

WHAT IS YOUR "GO TO" BOOK, MOVIE OR TV SHOW TO LIFT YOUR MOOD?

Apart from the aforementioned Wodehouse, I like anything involving W. C. Fields, Key and Peele, Peter Sellers or Madeline Kahn, the movies *Arsenic and Old Lace* and *The Producers* and scenes from *The Carol Burnett Show* and *The Honeymooners*.

WHAT IS THE KINDEST ACT SOMEONE HAS EVER DONE FOR YOU?

There are too many to remember—life seems to be full of them, big and small. Anyone

who pities you in distress or pain will live in your heart. I also had wonderful encouragement from grown-ups and teachers as a young man.

WHAT ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT?

My family, dogs, babies, innocence, kindness, Shakespeare, justice, poetry.

HOW DO YOU MAKE OTHERS CLOSE TO YOU HAPPY?

I try to empathize, be generous and amusing.

WHAT DO YOU DO TO PAY IT FORWARD?

Honor the attention of audiences and the aspirations of other actors.

WHERE IS YOUR HAPPY PLACE?

Wherever Carrie, Chumley and I are assembled with loved ones.

"Anyone who pities you in distress or pain will live in your heart. I also had wonderful encouragement from grown-ups and teachers as a young man."

—Michael Emerson



Live Happy