



School's out for Dennis Wolfberg, but he goes back there every night through his comedy routines.

He swaps books for laughs

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

School's out for Dennis Wolfberg. But he goes back there every night. After teaching for 15 years in New York — nine of those years in South Bronx — there's plenty of fodder for laughs.

Mr. Kotter doesn't have anything on Wolfberg, who took a leave of absence from his job of teaching sixth graders to venture into comedy full time.

Luminaries from the teacher-turned-comedian school include Robert Klein, Sam LeVine and Gary Coleman. Except hecklers in Wolfberg's classroom didn't throw barbs, they threw knives.

"Somebody from India would say, 'The Bronx? What a hell hole,'" said Wolfberg, who will perform his anecdotal brand of humor Friday and Saturday at the MainStreet Comedy Showcase in Ann Arbor. "Any elementary school that has its own corner is definitely different. You know things are bad when the school newspaper has an obituary column."

Wolfberg's comedy career is anything but dead. He's become one of the better-known upstart performers on the circuit.

Last year, he was voted "Best Stand Up Comedian in America" in an industry poll conducted by Rave Magazine.

Wolfberg, 42, has appeared on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson, "Late Night" with David Letterman, and most recently on "The Pat Sajak Show" on CBS (seen on Channel 63 in Detroit).

There's talk of him becoming a regular guest on the Sajak show. Also, he's scheduled to appear on the "Aspen Comedy Festival" which will be broadcast on Feb. 25 on Showtime.

THE NEW YORK-raised comedian is on the front porch of national

notoriety. So, perhaps Wolfberg is able to forgive those misguided souls who took two tires off his car on only his second day as a teacher in the South Bronx.

"That was their way of saying, 'Welcome to the community,'" he said.

The community of stand-up comedy was equally as warm. After leaving his position as a school teacher, Wolfberg honed his act on the tough New York nightclub circuit.

Most of the time he wouldn't get on stage until 2:30 a.m. His audience then was usually more inebriated than attentive.

"One night, I went on stage at 2:30 in the morning and there were only three people in the audience — three separate parties of three people," Wolfberg said. "As I went through the act, the waitress called out my name, 'Dennis!'" she said. "What are you doing?" I thought it was quite obvious, I was doing my act. She said, "What for?"

"Unbeknown to me because of the lighting, the three people had left."

Welcome to comedy. But things have definitely been on the upswing since Wolfberg said he's able to make enough money that he's able to

stay home with his wife, comedienne Jennie McBride, and infant more often.

Steady television exposure is the key. The talk show circuit can make the rigors of traveling the comedy club circuit a bit more bearable.

OF COURSE, the Yankee Stadium for comedians is Johnny Carson's show. A good night on the "Tonight Show" can go a long way.

"It's really overwhelming," Wolfberg said. "There's a sense your entire work . . . is going to live or die in that six minutes you're on the show. Imposed upon that are the millions and millions of people who are watching you."

"I remember Johnny meeting me backstage and telling me, 'Relax and just have fun tonight,'" I told him. "That's easy for you to say. You've been doing this for quite awhile." It does get easier. The more you are on, the more you become acclimated with it."

Dennis Wolfberg will perform two shows at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Jan. 20-21, at MainStreet Comedy Showcase in Ann Arbor. For more information, call 896-9050.

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Here are some listings of comedy clubs in our area. To let us know who is appearing at your club, send us the information: Comedy Listings, Observer & Eccentric, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.

- **BEA'S KITCHEN**
Tony Hayes, Arturo Shelton and "Downtown" Tony Brown will appear Friday and Saturday, Jan. 20-21, at Bea's Comedy Kitchen, 541 Larned, Detroit. Showtimes are at 8:30 p.m. 10:45 p.m. Reservations: 961-2581.
- **COMEDY SPORTZ**
Comedy Sportz at the Heidelberg will have improvisational comedy at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. The club is at 830 p.m. and 11 p.m. Reservations: 995-9888.
- **JOEY'S**
Gary Kern will appear on Wednesday through Saturday, Jan. 18-21, at Joey's Comedy Club, 36071 Plymouth Road, Livonia. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and 8 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. No smoking night is Thursday (also at 8 p.m. Friday).
- **LOONEY BIN**
Norma Verga will appear at 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Jan. 20-21, at Looney Bin at the Wolverine Lounge, 1855 Gilegany, Walled Lake. Reservations: 669-9374.
- **MAINSTREET**
Dennis Wolfberg will appear at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, Jan. 20-21, at MainStreet Comedy Showcase, 314 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Reservations: 996-9050.
- **COMEDY CASTLE**
Doug Ferrari will appear Tuesday through Saturday, Jan. 17-21, at Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle, 4593 Woodward, Berkeley. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday and 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Reservations: 542-9900.
- **PROCK'S**
Bob Pasche will appear on Friday and Saturday, Jan. 20-21, at Prock's Comedy Show Room, 1019 W. Maple, Clawson. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. and 10:45 p.m. Reservations: 280-2026.

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