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# *Tiffany Haddish helps turn darkness into laughter at the Laugh Factory's Comedy Camp*

By [CHRIS BARTON](#)

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On a recent Saturday afternoon, the usually raucous atmosphere of the Laugh Factory is nowhere in evidence, the lights are turned up and the place is largely empty except for a young, attentive audience watching as 15-year-old Destiny Smith takes the stage in dark shorts and a black sweatshirt.

Welcome to comedy camp, where two-drink minimums are traded for wedges of watermelon, trays of cookies and a catered lunch. Clubs such as The Laugh Factory can be dark, vulnerable spaces where comics face unpredictable crowds that can be marked by hostile drunks or simple disinterest. But at this performance space, a little light comes in.

Established 34 years ago by club owner Jamie Masada, comedy camp invites some 30 children ages 9 to 16 to interview and audition for eight weeks of onstage experience and instruction from working comics. While the kids in every class are drawn from multiple cities around town and economic backgrounds, Masada has long placed a focus on helping kids who face deeper challenges than most, whether from the loss of a parent, a disability or other hardships.

The eight-week program culminates with a graduation this weekend and, no small extra detail, their first paycheck as performers — \$100. The camp has drawn more attention in the last several months largely due to one of its graduates, Tiffany Haddish, who has become of Hollywood's hottest stars thanks to her turn in "Girls Trip" and several other projects.



"What I believe is each time they do this, it gives them confidence," says Masada during a lunch break from a recent session. "Laughter is such a healing thing. You talk about it, you laugh about it," he adds.



*Anthony Torrence, center, laughs along with his fellow Comedy Camp attendees at the Laugh Factory in Los Angeles.  
(Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)*

Seated in one of the horseshoe-shaped booths at the back of the club in a loose T-shirt and jeans, Masada is an engaged audience member, laughing when the jokes work and clapping the loudest from the back. He remembers former graduates who went from comedy camp to law school, medical school or — in Haddish's case — international stardom.

Haddish was 15 and in a group home situation when she attended the camp, which then counted Dane Cook, Charles Fleischer and Richard Pryor among its mentors. "[The camp] gave me a voice, you know? It was the first time I felt safe," she said, speaking as she was headed to work on the TBS series "The Last O.G." "It was the first time a man told me I was beautiful and I didn't think anything bad was going to happen. People were listening, and I learned communication skills, how to write a joke. I learned a lot."

Haddish returns to mentor new students every year, though that's gotten harder as her schedule has become more demanding. On the day I visited, comic and star of Showtime's "I'm Dying Up Here" Erik Griffin was alongside "United Shades of America" contributor Ron G, stand-up veteran Paul Rodriguez and Tehran Von Ghasri, a Laugh Factory regular who performs under his first name and has been a camp regular for the past seven years.

"The things that are the most stressful to you or that bother you the most — maybe that's what you should talk about," Haddish remembers learning from Pryor, whose



career unflinchingly reckoned with horrors from his personal life. "Because you're not the only person that's going through that, and, guaranteed, somebody's going to be able to relate. And if you can find the funny in it, it'll be easier to deal with."



*Comedy Camp attendee Ilene Delgado gives her stand-up routine at the Laugh Factory.  
(Wally Skali / Los Angeles Times)*

"I just get excited because I can see all the hope in their eyes," says Ron G, who has a Comedy Central special in the works. "You can tell some of them have been through things, but I just want to share my energy and my lessons to teach them that you can have a real career doing this."

While Hollywood dreams are common among the camp attendees, it's far from the only goal for its mentors. "What we try to do is, we let them know that there's really no rules for stand-up, that everything is fair," said Rodriguez, who has been coming to the camp since its inception.

"We try and emphasize to them that it's not really a pathway to show business, it's a pathway to freeing themselves and being able to speak in front an audience."