

## Locally-based comedian is straight man in the community

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Not everything Jonathon Gates does is for laughs. There's another side to the brash comedian known for his popular Black Comedy Explosion events and raucous emcee repartee.

You can see this funnyman in action this Friday night, Sept. 26, at Russell Auditorium when he hosts his once-a-month hilarity fest. Comics from HBO Def Comedy Jam and Bet Comic View are on the roster. Doors open at 8 p.m.; the show starts at 9.

Or check out his celebrated annual Libra blast. This year, Sun. Oct. 12, the big party is at Club Lido's, the handsomely redecorated Wonderland Ballroom in Revere. "It's so nice, you don't even have to put up balloons," comments Gates, who runs the lavish affair with Miss Muffen. All Libras who pre-register get in free. Call 617-296-9801 for more info.

"People say to me, How do you put up with him?" confides his wife of almost 25 years and his sweetheart to this day, Cheryl Wedgeworth Gates, a lifelong resident of Boston's black community. We are driving from her secretarial job at Beth Israel. Jonathon picks her up from work every day. "What's for supper?" she asks him. "Chicken," he says.

The comic's audiences take his flip stage persona for the real person. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

That's not him at all. To start, he's a family man. "At home, I'm the serious one," comments Jonathon. "I'm hunkered down, trying to watch TV. They make the jokes. They rag me." The Gates have five children: Shayn, 20, who's in the Navy; Jontue, 19, who's an assistant manager at Foot Locker; Nakia, 18, a college student at Pine Manor; Kamaar, 16, a student at East Boston High; and Javon, 10, a student at Renaissance Charter School.

The charter school principal, Dr. Roger Harris, was once Jonathon's principal too. When Gates moved to Roxbury in his senior year of high school from Elloree, South Carolina, he attended West Roxbury High School. He was on the football team. Football is where his interest lay.

Football was everything to him at that stage of his life. He got a sports scholarship as a line backer to Ohio Tech. Books were the furthest thing from his mind. "Until I tore my cartilage," relates Gates. "I had thought that life was one big football game. I found out that life is more than that. I couldn't do anything because I hadn't really studied."

Now, he reaches out to young athletes so they don't make the same mistake.

The lesson he learned the hard way he instills into high school football players at Jeremiah E. Burke, where Gates is the defensive coach. No money is changing hands; he does it on a volunteer basis. "I get not one cent," he confirms.

On the leafy green Ronan Park in Dorchester at Mt. Ida Street last Thursday, the team is suited up in its bright blues and crisp whites practicing for a game Friday with Boston English. The large scenic playground has a baseball diamond, a basketball court, a soccer field and a football field. Today, however, it's empty except for the line of eager, helmeted youngsters. At a distance you can see Boston Harbor sparkling on this clear fall day. The coaches' voices carry on the breeze to the stands where a few young women sit watching the practice.

Gates runs plays with the defense squad. At one point, he takes a youngster aside for a conversation just between the two of them.

"He's one of the best defensive coaches around," commends John Rice, the amiable head coach for the Burke team for the past four years and before that assistant coach for eleven. "Coaching is teaching; I love it," Rice continues. "It's a group of kids working for one common goal but each of them has his own job to do."

Rice feels lucky to have Gates working with the team. "With expertise and character like his, he has a calling with the kids." (Jeremiah E. Burke won the Friday game against English, 20 -- 13.)

After the game, the tireless Gates, who played semipro for the Taunton Raiders until his old injury acted up, talks about his work with the Burke youngsters. "I'm not going to say, I don't want to win," he notes, "but what I want most of all is for them to win a better future.

"I love coaching. You see a kid get it and his eyes open up. You run a play they didn't think would work and it does. That's satisfying."

Gates, who years back coached for Mattapan Pop Warner football and also currently coaches the semipro Randolph Oilers, adds, "I get phone calls from these kids. 'I've finished my homework. Can you give me another play to think about?'"

Now it's time to dash off to pick up his wife at Brookline Ave. Earlier in the day he was out in the community promoting his Black Comedy Explosion night.

"I have to be a busy bee," he says. "I have to make a living."

True, except for when he's making time for his family or for coaching the kids.