

Heard the one about the Tech prof who thinks he's a comic?

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OK, so the gigs aren't the greatest: an infertility nursing conference? The U.S. Carpet Recycling Industry's annual meeting? Biker night at the Sonic Drive-In? Tough crowds, all of 'em.

But as Pete Ludovice sees it, if you can get laughs there, you can get them anywhere.

For the last couple of years, Ludovice has been bringing his special brand of geek humor to obscure corporate meetings and clubs all over the country. A chemical engineering professor at Georgia Tech by day, Ludovice decided to give stand-up comedy a try by night. His motto? Engineers: not just funny-looking anymore.

Ludovice's specialty, as he sees it, is to take "otherwise boring material and make it funny."

He delivers his jokes in a booming voice, with zingers on everything from pocket protectors to Viagra.

A 44-year-old married father of two, Ludovice decided to break in to the standup biz at an open mic night at the Funny Farm in Roswell in January of 2004. Ludovice, who earned his Ph.D. from MIT, summoned his courage, penned some geek jokes and got on the stage. He goes by the name Dr. Ludicrous, a nickname given to him by Tech students after some "unrealistic expectations on a statistics test."

He calls comedy his "mid-life crisis." He jokes that it's cheaper than a sports car, less dangerous than a motorcycle and less likely to earn him a divorce than chasing college students.

Ludovice said he's not afraid of bombing and has done so spectacularly on some occasions.



Jenni Girtman/AJC

Pete Ludovice, a chemical engineering professor at Georgia Tech, performs his stand-up comedy routine in Marietta on Aug. 6 for the Democratic Alliance. He goes by Dr. Ludicrous, a nickname students bestowed after some "unrealistic expectations on a statistics test."

Biker night didn't go quite as well as he hoped. He tanked at Twain's, a bar in Decatur. And a gig in Homosassa, Fla., had him worried he might end up on the business end of a beer mug or rotten tomato.

"I've killed, and I've bombed," he said. "The majority have gone well. You've just got to have no fear."

And so, the nutty professor perseveres.

Last Sunday night, Ludovice was running around a Roswell sports bar, readying for a gig for the East Cobb Democratic Alliance. As local politicians glad-handed and gabbed in business suits, a sweat-soaked Ludovice strung up speakers and lights, testing electrical outlets and dashing back and forth to his minivan in the parking lot. "I'm part roadie, part talent tonight," he said.

Word has been spreading around campus about his extracurricular activity, and several students have made it to his gigs. Former student Wendy Anderson, now a product developer at Kimberly-Clark, said she and a group of friends first caught Ludovice's act at the Funny Farm.

"It was definitely strange to see your professor tell a dirty joke," she said. "A little different from class, that's for sure."

He crams in time for his comedy in between his hectic work schedule of teaching and research by writing and recording his jokes in the car and using his patient wife and a few unsuspecting Tech colleagues as sounding boards.

"We'll be at lunch, and Pete will say something and I'll say 'Wait, is this a bit? Are you practicing?'" said Martha Gallivan, an assistant professor in the chemical engineering department. "He usually is. But it makes for an amusing lunch."

Gallivan said Ludovice's most successful jokes are the ones he aims at the technical crowd.

"Believe it or not, there's a lot of funny stuff in chemical engineering," she said.

Just before his act Sunday, Ludovice changed into a button-down shirt and paced in an empty room, practicing his routine as folks chowed down on ribs and potato salad. The Democrats hadn't made a serious dent at the cash bar, and the atmosphere was more reserved than rowdy.

"Tough crowd," Cobb resident Roy Westover said. "I feel for the guy." Minutes later, Ludovice was on the stage, earning big laughs with jokes about Ralph Reed and the Republican Party. A few fell flat and got tepid titters instead of guffaws. No big deal, Ludovice says.

As he sees it, he's got another few years before he can make people laugh until they "want to wet their pants." It takes comedians 10 years to really master the craft and hit their stride, he says.

But whether he lands on Leno or fades into comedic obscurity, Ludovice knows one thing: "I'm not about to quit my day job."