

Dare to fail: Finding your voice through improv



Current student Niki Kalmus, a 2020 MPP candidate, offers up valuable lessons learned from her career in improv and her work in social justice, all while bringing humor to the San Diego community

By Rachel Hommel | GPS News



Don't take life too seriously. Not the typical advice given to students at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS). But for Niki Kalmus, play has helped her inside and outside the classroom. Her form of play? Improvisation.

Moving to San Diego after finishing up her undergraduate degree at the University of Hartford, Kalmus was looking for a way to make friends, build self-confidence and bring more laughter into her life. In the last five years, she has become a master at improv, making a name for herself as both a teacher and a mentor.

“I fell in love with the expression as well as how much emphasis is placed on being yourself,” said Kalmus. “Improv is such an honest and vulnerable art form.”

An advocate of social justice, she has taught workshops for the [San Diego Center for the Blind](#), immigrant women at [Survivors of Torture International](#), rehabilitation facilities at San Diego juvenile hall and various other workshops specific to women. For these communities, laughter allows them a chance to heal.

“For the female survivors I work with, they are able to be present and in the moment,” said Kalmus. “During a class, they can forget about everything else and laugh again.”

As a teacher, she hopes to find ways to not only improve our local community but our nation’s policies, making life easier and more enjoyable for everyone. In each of her classes, she starts off with an exercise where the goal is to make mistakes. Yes, mistakes. These skills help build self-confidence, fostering the ability to make a decision and stand by that decision.

“This exercise is great for recovering perfectionists, myself included,” laughs Kalmus. “Improv allows you to get comfortable with uncertainty, as well as improve your ability to trust and think quickly on your feet. You have to trust yourself and the people around you.”



Kalmus encourages others to go the bold route and to take those risks. From the quantitative methods series to speaking in large groups, improvisation has helped her immensely at GPS, remembering that it is okay to fail and that joy, play and

laughter are contagious. Her biggest advice to her cohort? Always say yes.

“The key tenant of improv is yes,” emphasizes Kalmus. “So many times in the day we are told no. When it comes to ideas in the classroom, that flexibility and open-mindedness is really beneficial in a group environment.”

She encourages others to join her in her journey - to take a class, relieve some stress and foster a sense of camaraderie with your teammates. In each of her improv classes, she is reminded to take a chance and always laugh at yourself.

“Dare to fail, it’s okay to take risks, and improv solidifies this idea,” said Kalmus. “Take a risk and see how you are rewarded. Making a mistake in improv turns into a gift.”

To check it out for yourself, visit finestcityimprov.com.