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The Joke Gym offers 5 minutes of fame

By Michelle Mills, Staff Writer

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Two Thursdays each month, comedians and comedy fans gather in the back room of Zapata Vive Mexican Restaurant & Cantina in Arcadia for an evening of fun.

A bright, clean stage, tables and chairs, plus a few plush couches, along with full menu and drink service make for a welcoming atmosphere. This is the Joke Gym, an open mic night produced by Pasadena residents Paula Johnson and Scott Shimamoto.

The two met while attending StandUp Academy, Bobbie Oliver's comedy class, in Pasadena.

"We found out pretty quickly that most of the open mics were out in Hollywood or they were some place far away, the west side, and you have a long commute and you have to wait to get on stage," Johnson said.

Shimamoto often ate lunch at Zapata Vive and thought it might be a good place to hold their own open mic nights. The Joke Gym has now been held regularly there since February and, in addition to performer sign-ups, it has featured guests such as Evan Dagger, Sally Mullins, Andy Konigsmark, Barry Wesienberg, Victor Vega, Johnny Roque and Shep Blumenthal.

Johnson didn't grow up planning to do comedy.

"I thought I was perfectly normal; my friends thought I was the funny one," Johnson said.

She earned a degree in journalism from Cal State Northridge and is self-employed as a marketing consultant. Johnson enjoys sewing and shopping.

She considers herself an "accidental comedian," as she won the class in a charity auction and isn't planning on making it a career. She admires Ellen Degeneres and Bob Newhart and, like them, specializes in observational humor.

"I talked to my doctor and he said I'm starting menopause," Johnson said. "I told him, no, he was insane because I shop at Costco and I have 6,000 tampons."

Shimamoto said he was always the smallest kid in class, plus he was in the gifted program during school. Playing sports and comedy were his saving graces.

"It was either be funny or get my butt kicked, I chose to be funny," Shimamoto said.

THE JOKE GYM

7-9 p.m. first and third Thursday of the month;
open mic signups 6:30 p.m.

Zapata Vive Mexican Restaurant & Cantina

101 S. First Ave.

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Arcadia

Free

www.thejokegym.com; <http://thejokegym.blogspot.com>