

The Columbian
Life

Section D

Today's weather picture by Jessica Janisch, 9, La Center, La Center Elementary School



FRIDAY, MAY 12, 2006

Giving students a study edge

Supplement touted as safe stimulant for pulling all-nighters

By MONICA HATCHER
Knight Ridder

MIAMI — As college students rev up for final exams, thousands will snub the coffee, Vivarin, and Red Bull and reach instead for far more potent study aids in illegal prescriptions of Ritalin and Adderall.

This year, two University of Miami students say they've created a legal alternative, a dietary supplement called Focuset. Advanced Student Concentration Formula. Just in time for finals, Jason Neufeld and Justin Hertzberg are offering a money-backed guarantee it's got what students need to pull those all-nighters.

With Focuset launched just last month, it's too early to tell how — or if — it will catch on with students. And while dietary supplements include natural ingredients, that doesn't necessarily make them safe, doctors have warned.

But the new business does point to the popularity of attention deficit disorder drugs: A study published last year in the journal *Addiction* found that as many as 25 percent of students surveyed on some campuses said they had misused ADHD medications.

The graduate students, both 25 and getting joint degrees in law and business, said they saw prescription abuse among their peers — especially at the graduate level, where heavy workloads and deadlines are constant.

Hertzberg and Neufeld, who themselves were looking for an academic edge, saw a possible solution to the problem — and a business opportunity.

The students say they raised funds from family, angel investors, and industry professionals on a skeletal business plan and founded the aptly named Joint Degree Labs about a year ago in Coral Gables, Fla. Soon after, they began researching dietary supplements.

Focuset is an amalgam of B vitamins, caffeinated herbs and other natural extracts. The ingredients are similar to those in other dietary supplements that promote energy and concentration. But the students claim their secret is in the quality of the herbs and vitamins as well as Focuset's unique recipe.

The company Web site, www.focuset.com, boasts an endorsement from Dr. Dennis Padla, a board-certified psychiatrist based in Michigan. Padla, the chief medical adviser in formulating the product, is compensated for representing the company. He said he would not risk his professional reputation by endorsing something he did not feel was safe.

"There is a need in the community to have something that is safe for students who don't need to be taking massive amounts of caffeine or using prescription medications off-label and buying them for other kids," Padla said.

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More health and fitness stories.

Most of the performers at the recent American Sign Language comedy night in downtown Portland — and many in the crowd — had ties to the Washington School for the Deaf in Vancouver.



A young Clark County actress and American Sign Language comedy nights use humor to bridge deaf, hearing worlds

Silence on stage



Tiffany West of Hazel Dell, center, gets ready in the basement of Embers, a Portland nightclub, with fellow performer Yvonne Neumann, right, also a Washington School for the Deaf graduate. They shared the dressing room on this night with drag queens, who provide the club's late-night entertainment.

Photos by MIKE SALSURBY/The Columbian

By BRETT OPPEGAARD
Columbian staff writer

Three hours before showtime, Tiffany West descends the steps into the nightclub's basement. She finds a small table and begins stacking her costumes in the reverse order in which she will change into them later that night. The 25-year-old doesn't flinch from the sounds made by a drag queen in 5-inch heels contorting to get around her from behind, then click, click, clicking past. West remains crouched, digging through her backpack.

West — who considers herself

somewhat of a stage veteran after performing in a couple of college and community theater plays — has insisted up until this point that she doesn't get nervous in front of an audience. But a lot of people she knows have been talking about her upcoming performance. She's going to be on stage almost the entire show. A big crowd is expected. This night means a lot to her. It also means a lot to the community she's representing.

Hair still wet from the shower after softball practice, plus running through a rainstorm to get inside the downtown Portland club, West looks

carefully at each piece of clothing she pulls from her backpack.

Even with that meticulous approach, she finishes the job with hours to spare. So she tries to relax in various ways: She checks and rechecks her eyeliner. She vigorously jumps up and down. She looks over a handwritten poster that states the order in which her troupe will perform that night's variety show skits. A few minutes later, she looks at the poster again.

The crowd, including many family members and friends, meanwhile starts arriving even before the doormen get there. A couple of hundred people eventually fill the place, which

usually caters to gays and lesbians. Director Jeska Duckworth tells the cast backstage that it's the biggest audience yet for one of these semi-regular American Sign Language comedy shows. Duckworth offered the first one in 2002, as part of her work with the nonprofit Deaf Hearing Out Reach, which focuses on blending the worlds of the hearing and the deaf. While the shows are always performed in sign language, they also incorporate voice interpreters who translate the action, making it possible for both communities to

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Did you know?

With the Washington School for the Deaf in Vancouver (established in 1886) and the Oregon School in Salem (founded in 1870), the Vancouver-Portland area naturally has become home to a large community of hearing-impaired people. The Southwest Washington Center of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing estimates 34,000 people with that disability live within the seven counties it covers: Clark, Skamania, Lewis, Cowlitz, Klickitat, Pacific and Wahkiakum.



Tiffany West takes a break between scenes with fellow comedy night performer Austin Richey of Vancouver.

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Silence on stage



Jody Barrong, Yvonne Neumann and Tiffany West, left to right, celebrate in the basement of Embers after their performance.

Photos by MIKE SALSURBY/The Columbian

Comedy:

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share the experience.

"I want everyone to start laughing together," Duckworth signs.

Before the show, though, West doesn't look like she's having much fun. She's pale. Slumped in a chair. She gestures to fellow performers, "I feel like I need air." She takes a few quick breaths, signing her thoughts, "Calm down, calm down." She later adds, "I just want to get a (beer)." Just about everyone else in the seven-person cast has been involved in this comedy show series before. West not only is new to the troupe, improvisation and acting out humor, she doesn't typically try to entertain people who can hear. Deaf friends laugh at her sarcastic quips in conversation. But she wonders how — or if — her understated style will translate.

She goes upstairs to check out the situation. The club, Embers, is dimly lit and smoky. Female impersonators are the regular entertainment. There are rainbow-colored benches out front. Posters of muscular men without shirts on the walls.

West spots her mother, Laurie, in the crowd and rushes over to her.

Her mother signs, "Good luck!"

West responds, "Mom, don't say 'good luck.' That's bad ..."

Laurie quickly signs, "Break a leg."

That seems to settle West, and now she's ready for the show to begin. Even though it's her first attempt at comedy, West and director Duckworth acted together a few years ago in a Northwest Theatre of the Deaf production, remaining friends since. Everyone involved in this show is a volunteer, and Embers provides the space as a way to support the deaf community. Money raised from the cover charge and donations gets split among a half-dozen related charities.

A night in the majority

As the show is about to start, the club's entertainment director, Robt Thomas, looks over the scene. He's excited by the turnout, saying, "Being gay, we're always in the minority. The hearing impaired, the gay, for once (at least at Embers), we're in the majority."



Tiffany West of Vancouver had to overcome more than nerves to get on stage recently as part of the American Sign Language comedy night series. West and the six other members of the deaf cast incorporated interpreters into their act as a way to bring people together, the deaf as well as the hearing.

The performers huddle one last time, in a circle in a hallway behind the stage. In silence, Duckworth signs a variety of last-second encouragements. They put their hands together in the middle, count to three and make an audible cheer. Everyone takes their places, and Duckworth goes on stage in a huff. She's pretending the members of the cast are late, unprepared and in need of a kick in the pants.

West grabs a cocktail and starts mingling with the crowd as part of the bit. She most recently has been working as a substitute student counselor at the Washington School for the Deaf in Vancouver, where her mother also works as a counselor. But she moved back into her parents' Hazel Dell home a few weeks ago to save money and prepare for graduate school to further study education of the deaf. She's already finished bachelor's degrees in elementary education and Spanish at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., the world's only college specifically designed for deaf students. While she waits for her next stint in school to start, she's reviving her interest in acting and keeping busy biking, camping, hiking, rock climbing and

participating monthly in the local version of Deaf Professional Happy Hour, a national program that organizes regular social outings for those who can't hear. West generally surrounds herself with friends and family members who are deaf, or friends who can hear but also know how to sign. Yet she doesn't want to be limited in any way, from the things she does to the people she knows. That means taking risks. Going beyond friends and family and comfort to see what — and who — else is out there. In the process, West is exposed. She's under a spotlight, trying to make strangers laugh.

Raise your hands

One of the first skits of the night, "Dancing with the Deaf," mocks a competition between hearing-impaired versions of Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie. At first the joke is that the characters can't stay in step with the music, but then, as if someone is monkeying with the radio, the tune abruptly becomes static and on comes a news report about the war (while Hilton, Richie and their partners keep smiling and dancing). A few in



Arms extended with hands raised and waving signals applause.

the crowd laugh out loud. Most, though, respond to the visual humor of the prissy Hilton dancing with a partner picked from the crowd, who's manhandling her. The two even accidentally fall off the front of the stage. When they hop back up and carry on, they act like they meant to do it. When the skit is over, cheers are mixed with two-thirds of the audience extending their arms and waving their hands (applause to the deaf).

Sight gags, obscenities, slapstick, potty humor, sexual innuendo and a lot of other-wise general silliness follow. Dick Cheney with a hunting rifle. Women wrestling. Marching penguins.

One of West's roles is to provide "news breaks" in between skits, deliver zingers and give the rest of the cast time to change costumes. During one particularly tight time sequence, she rushes out on stage and starts to deliver her joke, but a woman at

one of the front tables walks up to her in the middle of the moment and points to West's pants. West looks down, zips her zipper, finishes the joke then hustles off.

She signs to the other performers backstage, who saw the commotion, "That woman who caught me on the fly works at (the Washington School for the Deaf)."

Duckworth signs, "I saw (the audience) laughing."

"Now, everybody I work with ...," West signs. "Oh my God."

Rapid response

No one has time to dwell. If not on stage or changing costumes, the performers are constantly relaying cues to each other. Goofs — like the fall off stage and the wardrobe malfunction — happen. Props break. A hearing aid pops out during a pratfall. A video segment starts too early, with no way to communicate to the control booth other than by wildly waving arms and signaling to start the clip over.

For the finale, the troupe presents a reunion of the boy band New Kids on the Block. The performers dance, strike ridiculous poses and at the end, one of them does a back flip. Part of the crowd cheers and hoots approval, part of the crowd silently extends arms and waves hands wildly.

In the basement greenroom afterward, cast members are hugging and congratulating each other. One of them, Yvonne Neumann, signs, "Now, it's time to drink!" West goes back upstairs and finds friend Denis Meunier, who can hear as well as use sign language fluently. She grabs a glass of Widmer Hefeweizen from the bar and heads with him for the table where her parents are sitting. Drag queens are now performing in the back-ground.

West starts by gesturing about the zipper incident, with a dejected look on her face.

Her mother, Laurie, interrupts, signing, "You were perfect."

West continues to try to explain what happened.

"Everything was perfect," Laurie signs. "We loved it."

West's smile gives away her satisfaction as she takes a sip of beer.

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