



KEVIN MONTAGUE

# LIFE'S A TOSSUP

Linda Levine helps students old and young juggle work and play

BY JODY ULATE

Crescendos of laughter spill from the seams of Linda Levine's classroom door into the hush of the hallway outside. As the door swings open on the last day of class, nattering students pour out of the room. Around their necks, white paper plates with fluted edges dangle from fuzzy red yarn. The plates are scrawled with compliments from classmates in bright blue, purple and green ink. Some students place their plate-medallions in backpacks and wait in line to hug Levine before they go. "Good luck on your finals," she calls out, hugging and waving to the still-giddy students.

Today, the ruddy-haired lecturer is teaching "Play and Creativity," a course that helps San José State frosh adjust to college life. She shows them how to avoid being overwhelmed by mixing up all their everyday "have-tos" with a bit of fun, which happens to be Levine's specialty.

Arranging Levine's own schedule often involves a shoehorn and spectacular legerdemain. She fills her days teaching, helping grieving children pull smiles from frowns,

moving corporate teams from mired to motivated, and leading any number of other workshops. And on some days, Levine dabs on white pancake makeup and dons a floppy hat. You see, in addition to being a teacher, life coach, grief counselor, and workshop facilitator, she is also sometimes Rainbow the Clown.

Levine is a skilled juggler—of everyday things and rubber chickens. For 44 semesters, she's been adding color to San José State's Hospitality, Recreation and Tourism Management Department. And she's been using her deliberately sunny approach to life to make people's lives "so much better than better."

## Living lightly

A self-described "extroverted clown person," Levine tries to liberate the creative in all her students—gray-chinned seniors, starched CEOs and aimless 18-year-old Spartans. She works a crowded room like an orchestra conductor. She knows when to bring in the horns, when to drop the strings, and seems to intuit what's needed to help each person find a distinctive rhythm.

When Levine met Mildred Garcia three years ago, Levine saw her potential. Garcia admits she had trouble finding life's silver lining back when, as a freshman, she would get bogged down with work and school. Now a self-assured SJSU junior and future elementary school teacher, Garcia can't

count the number of times each day that she thinks about Levine's advice to "take the ordinary and make it extraordinary." Garcia grins when she shares Levine's simple suggestion to turn in papers, even the ones a student might worry about, with a colored staple. But little changes in attitude lead to bigger ones.

Garcia works as a peer mentor assigned to Levine's "Play and Creativity" class. She also has a few bilingual community outreach jobs, where she makes sure students and parents have the educational resources they need. Instead of feeling the burden of the work, Garcia now sees each job as a stepping-stone toward where she wants to go. "Linda's going to change how you see the world," she says. "You'll see it with rainbow-colored glasses."

On this particular day in class, Garcia works with Levine on a class activity intended to show the students how to "live lightly," even when they're in the middle of a challenge—just like she learned from Levine. "Everyone stand in a circle," Levine says.

After answering each question, Levine explains, the students must toss a soft, swishing, yellow beanbag to someone else in the circle.

"What was most challenging about this semester?" *Swish-smush.*

"Living away from home." *Swish-flump.*

"What did you learn about yourself this semester?" asks Levine. *Swi--sh.* Plop.

"I can't catch," he says, scooping up the beanbag from the floor. Everyone giggles.

"OK, now what was most surprising about this semester?" Levine asks as she throws a second beanbag into the mix.

"I didn't gain the freshman 15," says another as she high-fives the student next to her. *Swish-fumpf.*

The *swish-flump-swish-smush* of the beanbags continues as they keep them in the air. Their voices take on a rhythm, too—one they've discovered this semester and are no longer afraid to share.

## Stop and smell the cupcakes

Some students come to Levine's class and tremble or blush at the thought of speaking in class. But when there's a game to play, everyone relaxes and class participation—and relating to other people—becomes less scary.

Sarah Piazza, a freshman with chestnut hair and pink-icing cheeks, laughs nervously when she talks about herself. During the semester, a homeless man asked her for money on her way home, Piazza recalls. Before Levine's class, she would have walked by such a man, she says, cupping her hand to cover her face, imagining the man to her right. But that day on the street, she was carrying a dozen extra cupcakes that she had baked for a class project, so she offered him cupcakes.

Piazza says she knows that Levine's class has changed her because she sees now that she can change somebody else's life with one small action. Pausing to really look even when things were busy, she took the homeless man by surprise. "I won't be hungry today," he said.

The whole point of Levine's classes and workshops is to learn how to use creativity and fun to accomplish goals, to make room for what's important, to see possibilities, and to really see and connect with people. Students young and old find their way and learn to live, Levine says, with extra exclamation points.

Many of Levine's San José State students balance family, multiple jobs and school. Still, Levine says, they're bound and determined to make it in college—no matter what it takes or how hard it gets. Just when the students are getting worn out mid-semester, Levine throws them a few juggling pins. Everyone is busy and has hardships, Levine says. Even Levine's hectic life gets out of balance. But "if you can learn to juggle," she says, "you can do anything." ♦



## THE WORK/LIFE MAESTRO

With lots of levity, Linda "Rainbow" Levine can handle just about anything life throws at her. But to stay balanced, she says the way others design their lives must be creative and unique. She offers some tips to help you arrange a life that works for you.

**DO:** *Figure out what you love to do—and do it.*

**DON'T:** *"Should" all over yourself. If you only listen to all the "shoulds," you'll never get to the "want-tos" in your life.*

**DO:** *Think carefully about the people in your life who bring out the best in you—and spend meaningful time with them regularly.*

**DON'T:** *Assume one lifestyle fits all. When we try on someone else's life and we fail, we feel bad about ourselves. Balance doesn't look the same for everybody.*

**DO:** *Put yourself on your to-do list. When you make your list, be sure to include things that rejuvenate you. Take a walk or call a friend, instead of just mowing the lawn.*

**DON'T:** *Worry about the judgment of others in how you live your life.*

**DO:** *Speak to yourself in as encouraging a fashion as you would speak to a friend.*

**DO:** *Remember the four Ds of time management: drop, delay, delegate and do. To be balanced, really think about what can be dropped, delayed or delegated—before you start doing.*

