



Finalists

6th Annual Humor Awards

Presented by
Humor That Works

In partnership with International Humor Month 2026

Congratulations to the Finalists!

These 24 individuals are using humor to make work better, relationships stronger, classrooms livelier, and some of the hardest conversations in life a little more bearable. It is our honor to recognize them.

This is the 6th Annual Humor Awards, and the first year of a new category structure. We are recognizing people whose work stands out across the eight competencies of humor: appreciating it, considering it, curating it, creating it, performing it, facilitating it, applying it, and empowering others with it.

The finalists in each category are listed alphabetically by last name. Winners will be revealed live at the 6th Annual Humor Awards Show on Wednesday, April 29, 2026 at 7pm ET.

Humor Appreciation Award

Most humor awards recognize the person making the jokes. This one recognizes the person noticing them: the audience member who laughs, the friend who says “that was genuinely funny,” the brain that finally starts tuning back into what’s delightful after a long stretch without. Appreciation is the one competency every other humor skill depends on.

Nominee: Heidi Hanna (Synergy Brain Fitness, Beyond Funny, WiseGolf)

Heidi has been incorporating humor into her work and research since stumbling into the AATH Conference during a dark depression. Realizing she hadn't laughed in a very long time, she wondered if perhaps she was missing a key part of her mental health treatment plan. Like any good nerd would do, she did a Google search (pre-ChatGPT) to consider the evidence. Although she was initially rejected as a speaker (apparently a glitch in the system), she leaned into the opportunity to share some insight on the benefits of humor on health.

Many experiences followed, from sitting in the back during a very strange "World's Best Laughter" competition, to hearing the story of Beth Usher (who would become a dear friend), to carrying bags for Karyn Buxman and holding her arm down when she tried to volunteer for another board position.

Although Heidi has always appreciated humor, before becoming a CHP she didn't fully embrace the power of humor, not only for her personal health and wellbeing, but for the impact she could have on her corporate and professional athlete clients. She now shares this insight with her humor homies in many ways: the Global Stress Summit, the book *What's So Funny About Stress*, international conferences, her *Beyond Funny* keynotes, LinkedIn courses (which have reached over 2 million students), and her new initiative *WiseGolf* (with an upcoming book and *Giggle Golf* event). She will also be sharing more during a Sunday morning keynote at the upcoming AATH conference.

More Details: [Beyond Funny Clip](#)

Nominee: Tyler Horvath

Gratitude practices have the unenviable distinction of being both scientifically well-supported and deeply, unbearably annoying. Tyler Horvath opens with exactly that frustration (“every day, five things I'm grateful for, it's so annoying”) before landing the punchline on himself. He thought he was a complicated human being, and it turns out that if he just tells his brain a few times a day that it's not that bad, his brain responds like a mildly surprised intern:

“I haven't thought about it like that. We do have good friends, thank you, yeah. I'll give you some dopamine today.”

What makes the bit work for Appreciation is that it lands the practice without undercutting it. The humor is the reluctance, the incredulity that something this simple actually works, the voicing of the brain as a separate character who needs the memo. The gratitude sticks. It's a comedic case for noticing what's good in your life, delivered by someone who'd rather not admit it's doing anything for him.

More Details: [Instagram Video](#) (language is NSFW)

Nominee: Nancy Sue Pitt (Head of the house)

For the first time in over six years, Nancy Sue signed up and attended an event via Zoom with Andrew Tarvin, after taking the Humor Intelligence test. This was significant because she knew

she was at a point in her grief recovery where she actually felt like she might be able to know how she is funny, or to notice things she thinks are funny and why. Since her dear husband died six years ago, nothing had been funny any more. It seemed permanent, until Andrew reminded her of his Pretzel and Pineapple; then about his silly brother who proclaimed with great importance that he farted in class, or Andrew's statement about "It's NUN of your business," and in his little ending statement, "Wit regards."

Nancy Sue loves birds and talks to them regularly, so she is not constantly talking to herself. She especially loves quails. Her favorite is Papa Quailie, with his ever-bouncing top knot and superior strut. The change has been gradual, but steady, and she is so appreciative.

More Details: She plans to purchase the entire Humor Intelligence report so she can refer to it often and become more adept at other humor skills as well.

Humor Consideration Award

This award honors the careful call: reading the room, weighing the moment, and making the judgment of whether humor will land or wound. Consideration is the humor skill that lives in the gap between “I thought of something funny” and “I said it out loud,” and it's what separates humor that connects from humor that alienates.

Nominee: Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe

Resilience research is not an obvious place to find humor advocacy, which is what makes Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe's framing so sharp. In a short video drawing on her research, she shares a finding her team didn't expect: resilient people are really funny, and often in ways that would get most of us sent to HR. Her first read was the obvious one, that the dark humor was a defense mechanism.

What her team actually found was a physiological mechanism underneath it. Laughter releases a natural tranquilizer that creates a brief window where pain recedes and, more importantly, where the brain shifts from reacting to responding. The humor doesn't solve the problem, but it creates the pause that lets someone make a better choice about it.

What makes this a Consideration nomination is the reframe. Dark humor in hard moments is often dismissed as inappropriate, or as a sign someone isn't taking things seriously. Dr. Hanley-Dafoe's research considers it on its own terms and finds something the rest of us missed: that knowing when to deploy it might be one of the most considered things a person under pressure can do.

More Details: [Instagram Reel](#)

Nominee: Allen Klein

Since 1989, when Allen Klein's first book, *The Healing Power of Humor*, was published, he has shown over a million people worldwide how to use humor and positivity to deal with not-so-funny stuff. A pioneer in therapeutic humor, Klein has also championed it in the field of death and dying with another book, *Embracing Life After Loss*, and his presentations at over 100 hospices and conferences.

From the very beginning, when he first learned of the value of humor and laughter during the terminal illness, and subsequent loss, of his young wife, to today when the PBS-bound documentary, *The Jollytologist®*, will once again provide humor, hope, and healing to a hurting world.

More Details: [Featured on NextAvenue \(PBS\)](#)

Nominee: Melissa Mork (International Speaker)

Melissa speaks with a powerful message. Whether it's a radio spot or an audience of 1,000, she shares stories of adversity and grief interlaced with appropriate humor.

I think when you can speak about grief in a way that is relatable and authentic, and are able to add humor to it, it's quite a talent. Her stories are often firsthand and incredible. She dares to share her vulnerability in talking about the death of her own family members and you walk away with a better appreciation of humor and how it can be used in difficult, gut-wrenching moments.

More Details: [TEDx talk](#)

Humor Curation Award

Not every humor moment requires original material. Sometimes the skill is having the right GIF at the right time, spotting the video that will land for this specific audience, or recognizing that someone in the thread needs a laugh and finding exactly the one that will deliver it. Curation is taste applied to comedy.

Nominee: Rachel McCoy

Rachel seems to always have the perfect GIF or reaction in a potentially awkward or tense situation. Two examples:

When asked in a Teams chat who takes care of a specific metric (for which everyone in the group chat should already know the person), several people answered “it's Rachel,” and Rachel responded with a GIF of Adele singing “Hello, it's me.” It made everyone feel less awkward about forgetting who takes care of the metric and put a smile on several faces.

Separately, in a meeting with an increasingly negative tone, Rachel waited for a pause to introduce the one positive story. Everyone was stuck on what to say next in ascertaining the year's results were not going as well as planned, and Rachel shifted gears with an elongated “soooo... would you like to hear about X? It's a GREAT story.” This changed the tone in a rapidly derailing meeting and also took the heat off those who were the focus of the negativity.

Nominee: Taylor Santore (Volta Insite, Applications Engineer)

Taylor sends the perfect meme or GIF to make you laugh when it's been a tough day. As part of a small startup team that needs small breaks in the constant pressure to keep going, he knows exactly when to send one, sometimes during an internal meeting, just to see if you crack.

He helps keep his engineering team motivated by making sure the office is a fun and desirable place to work.

Nominee: Lisa Yeager (Project Manager)

A colleague posted a video to the company Slack of their cat and dog wrestling. Lisa's response: a perfectly chosen GIF of Bill Murray in Stripes. That's the nominated moment, but it's also a representative one. Lisa has a knack for finding the reaction image that matches the energy of the thread, which is a smaller skill than it sounds and a more useful one than most people realize.

Good curation in a team chat is a form of social glue. It rewards the person who shared the original post, it gives everyone else a reason to stick around, and over time it builds the kind of culture where people actually want to share things. One Bill Murray GIF doesn't change a workplace. Lisa's habit of reliably having the right one does.

Humor Creation Award

This award honors the people making the jokes, puns, callbacks, cartoons, memoirs, captions, and clever phrasings that didn't exist before. Creation is craft of creating comedy for others to enjoy.

Nominee: Nikki Goldman (Author and Clinical Hypnotherapist)

Nomination: In her memoir, Lunacy is in my Family's DNA, she writes about growing up with undiagnosed dyslexia, debilitating depression and anxiety, and how she overcame these obstacles with humor.

Yelling was her mom's love language. Arguing was their Olympic sport. Each shouting louder than the other as if they were competing for the gold medal. That is until Nikki realized nobody wins trying to prove who's right. The tension in her gut was like the air inside an over inflated balloon. She finally let the air out, stopped arguing, and found peace.

Her Dad's escape was to sit in the living room chair in catatonic-like daydreaming. He had virtual reality before it was a thing. Nikki sat in the chair across from him waiting for his internal movie to be over before she could get any attention from him. Sometimes she had to wait a long time because it was a double feature.

She has taken this ability to cope with life's hardships with humor and turned it into an ability to help others in her 40-year career as a Clinical Hypnotherapist.

Her book and her therapy is not a "how to" cope with life's demons. It's more of a: pull the curtain back and laugh as you discover the wizard within.

Nominee: Kelly Maddox

Nomination: Kelly delighted the team by submitting test responses to a survey that were laugh-out-loud funny ("My work life is a dream."). Test data is a genre of writing almost no one bothers to make interesting, which is exactly why finding a Kelly-penned row in a staging environment feels like a small gift.

The moment is representative of a broader pattern: Kelly brings a sense of play to her work and looks for opportunities to make a coworker laugh or smile, even in the places most people treat as purely functional. It's a quiet, consistent kind of humor creation, and the kind that tends to shape a team's culture more than any big comedic swing ever does.

Nominee: Patrick Vennebush (The Math Learning Center, Chief Learning Officer)

Patrick works for a math organization, and he has created a series of Zoom backgrounds that include math jokes:

- One has a funny math poem.
- One shows an equation with the word OPINION (in Scrabble tiles) minus pi (the Greek letter and math symbol) equals an image of an onion. Get it? OPINION minus PI equals ONION.
- One asks, "Why is 6 afraid of 7?" (the world's most ubiquitous math joke).
- One has images of a pentagon and a hexagon, followed by the outline of Oregon (pentaGON, hexaGON, OreGON).

But his favorite one, and the one that always sparks a laugh and conversation, is just a photo he took of a still-wrapped stick of butter in a butter dish. As it turns out, the dimensions of butter sticks differ depending on where you are in the country: in the east, you have "Elgins," and in the west you have "stubbies."

Patrick's butter dish, which he brought to Portland when he moved from DC, was designed for the thinner east-coast sticks, but the sticks on the west coast are the thicker stubbies, and they just don't fit. At least, not well. The corners of the stick touch the cover, and things get all nasty.

Patrick has found that it always helps to get people participating in virtual meetings if he arrives with one of the joke backgrounds turned on. Folks immediately smile, some ask questions about it, and it gets things flowing in a fun way.

More Details: [Mathy Zoom Backgrounds on Math Jokes 4 Mathy Folks](#)

Humor Performance Award

Written jokes and delivered jokes are different animals. This award honors the skill of landing material, whether on stage, on camera, in a meeting room, or in the middle of a networking event. Timing, commitment, and the willingness to say the line even if it lands flat are what separate a good joke from a great performance of one.

Nominee: Lorelee Erickson

Lorelee was set to introduce a co-speaker at a recruitment event for a youth leadership program (her group of student leaders teach K-12 kids, and the audience that day was the adults who bring those students to class). Her own intro speech was planned. The emcee's wasn't. When the emcee finished, Lorelee skipped her prepared opening and used what they'd just said as her transition instead, improvising the bridge in real time.

The room laughed. The timing was right. And the laugh did exactly what a well-placed laugh in that context is supposed to do: it warmed up an audience that was about to hear a serious case for volunteering.

Performance isn't always polished material. Sometimes it's the willingness to drop your script when the room hands you something better, and the timing to make sure what you put in its place actually lands.

Nominee: Kevin Peterson

Kevin took a stand-up comedy class, and since he paid for it, he actually attended it. He was forced to perform weekly in front of his instructor and class, and he didn't die of fright or embarrassment. He did need more deodorant and better underwear.

His final included another performance at a bar where he actually got some real laughs, as well as groans and silence.

Since then, Kevin has performed at the nationally known Madison Comedy Club, where the manager said he was welcome back. He has also performed in front of his cat and his pine tree in the backyard. He isn't sure which was more disgusted with his material, as the cat groomed herself but the tree did wave some branches. He has done other stand-up routines at bars, a corporate gig in Dallas, TX, and opened for Brett Hollis at a Christmas show.

Nominee: Ed Reggi

Actor, facilitator, teacher, improviser. Reggi does it all! Every day the nominator works with Reggi, he makes them laugh. He always leans with humor first as it is the best way to approach anything in life. Using jokes, funny faces or voices, or gearing one up for the punch-line, Reggi empowers everyone he communicates with to be humorous. To embrace the hilarity of life. To laugh as a form of engagement. To be fun and silly.

They've worked closely with Reggi since 2021, and with his jokes, humorous demeanor, and improviser mind, they've been enriched by his perspective on life. "Yes, and..." everything and lead with humor.

More Details: [facebook.com/edreggi](https://www.facebook.com/edreggi)

Humor Facilitation Award

Facilitation is humor as a group activity rather than a solo performance. This award honors the people running the improv games, the icebreakers, and the group sessions that turn a collection of individuals into a room laughing together. It's teamwork disguised as play.

Nominee: Jessica Bensch

Jessica used the following icebreaker for a large group meeting of 30 people.

She started with the setup: "You are in a lifeboat. Your lifeboat is drifting towards a desert island. Choose one person you want to stay with. Try and choose based on how they may help you survive on the island."

She then had participants choose a number between 1 and 8, which selected their character (1 - Barbie; 2 - The Rock; 3 - Elon Musk; 4 - Oprah Winfrey; 5 - Mr. Bean; 6 - Taylor Swift; 7 - Kermit the Frog; 8 - Homer Simpson).

Each person, in their character, had 30 seconds to state why they should stay on the boat. Then the group decided who stays. By the end, people were laughing as they gave their pitches. The exercise is also a small-scale demonstration of group decision making, where information is limited and time constraints shape the answer.

For the large group of 30, Jessica broke them into smaller groups, and the winner of each group then pitched to the large group, which decided on the ultimate winner.

Nominee: J. Cornelius George (Laugh Your Class Off / Educator, Comedian, Founder of LYCO)

Cornelius George provides daily humor to students to engage them in the learning process. He teaches by using improv and created the Laugh More 3-day challenge that encourages teachers and students to bring more therapeutic humor into the learning environment for Humor Month. He also does monthly comedy shows for teachers and all who work in education to relieve stress. Conducts workshops on how to use improv in the classroom.

His students are also big fans of his approach:

- "Mr. George has made my peers and my learning experience, from last semester to the present day, more entertaining, interactive, and worth coming to school for. Whenever I am feeling down or upset in the morning, coming into his classroom makes my mood better. He doesn't use humor in mean or disrespectful ways, more brighten your day."
- "Mr. George makes classes better by making jokes every day, which helps people. When someone is having a bad day, you can always count on Mr. George to make it better with his jokes."
- "Mr. George is one of my favorite teachers in the whole building. You're never just going to be unhappy in his class, there's always laughter and he cares a lot about his students."
- "Every day, this teacher puts a smile on so many students' faces. He always finds a way to brighten up the classroom by joking and just being an easy person to converse with and be around."

More Details: [Featured on WSBTV](#)

Nominee: Soyeong Han (Speech-Language Pathologist and Founder of Kids Comedy Club)

Soyeong uses humor not as entertainment, but as a clinical tool for communication.

Soyeong is a South Korea-based speech-language pathologist who integrates humor into both clinical therapy and community-based programs. In hospital settings, she provides individual, paired, and group interventions for children with significant pragmatic language difficulties, helping them improve communication, emotional expression, and social interaction.

Building on this work, she also developed and led a free humor-based after-school program at a local community center, working with children from diverse and often underserved backgrounds over the course of two months. Many of the children initially showed limited engagement and difficulty expressing themselves. Instead of relying on direct instruction, Soyeong encouraged them to transform everyday situations into playful, exaggerated stories and share them with peers.

Over time, both in clinical and community settings, children began initiating conversations more actively and using humor as a tool to connect with others. What makes her work especially impactful is that humor is not used simply to entertain, but as a structured and intentional strategy to create meaningful changes in communication and social connection.

Across both clinical and community settings, her work focuses not on performing humor herself, but on facilitating others to discover, create, and use humor in their own lives. This approach reflects her belief that “anyone can become a humorous person,” and that humor can be a powerful tool for communication, connection, and everyday well-being.

More Details: [@kidscomedyclub.kr on Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/kidscomedyclub.kr)

Humor Application Award

Application is all about using humor as a tool. Softening a training module, breaking the ice at a networking event, or making a heavy topic actually land with an audience. This award honors the people who reach for humor not because it's fun (though it is) but because it's the best tool for the job.

Nominee: Sabrina Juran (UNFPA, Regional Advisor on Data and Population Dynamics)

Some of the most important topics in the world (disaster risk, demographic change, who gets left behind in a crisis) are also some of the hardest to get people to actually pay attention to. Sabrina's response is to keep finding creative formats that make the heavy stuff land. At a side event during the UN's CPD59, where 270 million people across Latin America and the Caribbean are exposed to at least one major natural hazard, she didn't narrate slides. She interviewed an AI demographic intelligence simulation on stage as if it were a guest, asking it where the risk concentrates, who's most vulnerable, and what to do about it. The Q&A rhythm turned a UN policy session into something delegates actually wanted to keep watching.

She does the same thing in a different register on LinkedIn, where her CPD59 reflection took the form of a six-panel cartoon: a mother packing a suitcase while her young daughter asks why she has to go to the meeting. The mom explains demographic policy work in language a child can follow ("Because countries need to agree on what matters for people"), and the daughter delivers the closing tag: "Do all those ideas fit in your suitcase?" It's the most reliable joke in the book, and it does what humor does best in this context. It sneaks the policy point past the part of your brain that scrolls past policy posts. Both formats are the same idea applied twice. Demographic intelligence saves lives, and getting people to engage with it is its own act of design.

More Details: [Example Cartoon](#)

Nominee: Tim Murphy (Murphy Entertainment)

One of the best examples of Tim using humor well happens at networking events. During his 30-second introduction, he often opens with a quick joke before introducing himself. It immediately breaks the ice, gets the room laughing, and changes the tone from stiff and awkward to relaxed and engaging.

What makes it so good is that his humor is never forced or showy, it gives other people permission to loosen up too, and soon others start adding humor into their own introductions. He has also done this at group gatherings where the energy was flat and predictable. By making a funny comment about the situation or tossing in a well-timed joke, he helps people connect and actually enjoy being there.

'More than once, people have told him afterward that he made a usually boring event far more fun and interesting. His humor brings people together, makes the room feel more human, and turns routine events into something people actually remember.

Nominee: Ian Schmidt (ALLO Communication, Talent Development Partner)

Ian consistently shows how to keep the work environment fun while continuing to accomplish the tasks necessary to still have jobs. He shares the occasional dad joke in team chats, is quick with a witty response, and makes sure to incorporate humor in the training facilitation he does.

One specific example was the rules he incorporated into an AI agent he built for training. It was designed to give feedback on applying the ADKAR model of change management, which may not sound particularly hilarious. However, he included rules that should someone have a particularly good plan, it was to compare it to time-specific meal orders at McDonald's, because the AI agent was especially infatuated with it ("That plan is a quarter pounder with cheese, a medium fry, and a Diet Coke, because I'm lovin' it!").

As a data point on Ian's impact: of the 19 well-wishes and notes of appreciation he received from his team on his work anniversary, 8 specifically called out jokes, laughter, entertainment, or humor as a contributing factor to why they enjoy working with him.

Humor Empowerment Award

The final award honors the people who don't just use humor themselves, they help others find it in themselves. Teachers, coaches, leaders, laughter yoga instructors, and anyone else who creates the conditions for other people to be funny, playful, and delighted. Empowerment is humor paid forward.

Nominee: Janice Bannister (Laughter Zone 101, Lead Instructor)

Janice has been teaching stand-up classes for 20+ years and she loves it. No two classes are ever the same. She teaches writing skills, stage presence, and for students who have never held a mic, how to use act outs and movement on the stage.

Most importantly, she encourages students to do authentic material they have passion about, and gives them honest feedback (along with feedback from their comedy buddies in the class). She reminds them that the notes are on the joke material, not a personal critique, but a chance to improve their writing and overall performance. The classes give them a new perspective on comedy performing. It's a lot of work: writing, editing, rewriting, more editing, open mics. There is more to it than just being the funny person in the office.

Part of Janice's goal when she started was to give students a live comedy club experience at the end of the classes, and it is usually the highlight of the learning. They get a real "wow, I did that" moment.

She encourages camaraderie in her classes, and along with numerous friendships, she has even had two weddings from students who met there. Her students have ranged in age from 8 to 92. When she first started teaching, it was all young dudes with their hats on backwards and pants falling down, and she heard a lot of dick jokes. Now the classes are more diverse, with women, men, and nonbinary students. And there always seems to be a bucket list boomer.

Janice's favorite moment is watching a student get on stage at the showcase, deliver their opening joke, and get a laugh. That's when she knows her work is done. She sees them breathe and smile and knows they are saying to themselves, "wow, my joke worked."

A lot of students are one and done. But several have gone on to stick with comedy careers and tour regularly with clubs, and one has two Amazon specials. Others use the classes to tighten up Toastmasters speeches, plays they're working on, or a speech at a friend's wedding. She gets a lot of hugs, some tears, and a lot of great thank yous after the showcase. But she reminds them: they did it, so they should be very proud of themselves.

Nominee: Chip Lutz (Pastor, Lord of Life Lutheran Church, Kenosha WI)

Pastor Chip took to Instagram for 40 Lenten days (and more) to bring at least 60 seconds of humility, humor, and hope to so many. He is relatable and uses humor to give both a breath and aha spiritual moment to his audience.

]This is all done to encourage all (it didn't matter what faith you follow) to take a moment to breathe (with a laugh) and reflect on how can you love better and how can you be kinder to yourself and others.

More Details: [Chip's Instagram](#)

Nominee: Sarah Routman (Founder and Owner, Laugh For the Health of It, LLC, DBA Laugh Healthy)

Sarah's journey began in her young daughter's hospital room, where she experienced a form of laughter so profound it transformed a serious moment and uplifted the heaviness of a serious and prolonged hospital stay. Years later, she recognized that same laughter in a Laughter Yoga session, and she's made it her mission to share it with others ever since.

For nearly 20 years, Sarah has studied the science and history of laughter and brought it to audiences worldwide, without relying on jokes or humor. Through her signature "laugh it out" approach, she helps people relieve stress, build connection, and rediscover a sense of joy and play. Her work spans seniors, healthcare professionals, families, and more, offering practical tools to navigate both life's highs and lows. Her book, *Discover the Power of Laughter: Jump-start Your Journey to Health and Joy*, allows Sarah to reach a wider audience, because in her heart, Sarah knows that the more people learn about the power of laughter, the more they can seize it and use it as the great medicine it is.

For the past 12 years, Sarah has offered a free laughter call every Monday morning, connecting people from across the US to share purposeful, playful laughter on the phone. Participants have reported feeling less stressed, anxious, and depressed. Many indicate they feel less pain, feel more connected, and more confident in their daily lives because of the calls. Sarah has also trained over 50 people across the US and Canada to be Laughter Yoga Leaders, and she's been named a Laughter Ambassador by Laughter Yoga founder, Dr. Madan Kataria.

After attending one of Sarah's sessions, a hospice caregiver had this to say: "This session changed my life and how I see stress. I feel like I have a secret weapon in my pocket now against stress and bad days, for myself and my patients."

More Details: LaughHealthy.com