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Elephant on the Block co-host Russell Cummings, pictured here with his daughter, hopes to “go big” with his new comedy series, which happens monthly at Rink Studios in North Sacramento.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RUSSELL CUMMINGS

## Big joke energy

### A new comedy series and cutting-edge venue bring creativity and vision to North Sacramento

#### “Is that your man?”

Comedian Jay Rich asks the question as he stares down into the front row at The Rink Studios. A man sits between two women, the spotlight shining on them. One woman, laughing, shakes her head, “no.”

So Rich turns to the other woman. “Is that your man?” he repeats.

She screams “No!” while laughing hysterically. “Oh, so you’re with both of them?” Rich says to the man. “My man!”

The audience roars with laughter. For a moment, any worries they brought with them may have disappeared.

This is the vibe during Elephant on the Block, an interactive monthly comedy series. The brainchild of Rink Studios co-owner Joann Martin and host/curator Russell Cummings, it offers a carefully selected lineup of comedians chosen

because of their ability to deliver laughs while engaging with the crowd.

The aim, Cummings said, is to create a space where folks can forget the outside world for a couple of hours. It’s a spirited community goal in a perhaps unlikely setting.

From the outside, the Rink looks like many other buildings along the well-worn strip of Del Paso Boulevard in North Sacramento.

Inside, the 11,250-square-foot venue, which opened earlier this year, has transformed from an abandoned skating rink into a space that fosters creativity by way of music, poetry and comedy.

The hardwood floors of the 1926 building seemingly echo with the laughter of children’s parties, skate hops, and first dates. It was that feeling that Martin, who built built her career in branding and marketing, says she fell in love with the first time she set foot inside in early 2017.

Martin and her partners purchased the building with the intent to turn it into a music incubator for Sacramento talent.

Now, when people first walk in, they may feel as if they’re in the middle of a Comedy Central soundstage. Martin and her team installed high-definition cameras and microphones above the audience for crowd shots and audio response. A 30-foot digital screen acts as the backdrop to comedians on stage. Each Elephant on the Block show is recorded and edited; its creators are bundling footage to pitch to nationally streaming networks, such as Hulu, Netflix and Twitch.

The shows feature a question-and-answer session between comedians and audience members and a host who is often just as funny as the acts. They have proven popular; the August and September shows are sold out.

Martin explains the series’ unique name. “You know how the ‘elephant in the room’ is always that thing that no one is talking about? For us, the Elephant on the Block is the vast amount of talent here in Sacramento,” she says.

Cummings, she said, has helped her bring it to life. “This is a big vision, and he is the only one I trust to carry out that vision,” she says. Cummings says his goals are two-fold.

“The calm side of me wants to be able to put together such a well thought out event you can’t help but be entertained,” he says with a smile “But the larger-than-life version of me sits back and thinks: ‘If someone hadn’t started Motown back in the day, then the world loses out on so much.’ So honestly, that’s the goal. Go big.” □