

'Politically incorrect' cartoonist delights audience

■ John Callahan puts his outrageous sense of humor on display in the EMU ballroom Tuesday

By Emily Gust
Oregon Daily Emerald

When John Callahan, who is quadriplegic, arrived in Eugene for his Tuesday speech at the University, the cartoonist was surprised that everything was so wheelchair accessible.

"I saw a hooker downtown, and she had a handicapped access sign," Callahan said.

Pausing, he looked into the crowd of about 300 students and community members gathered in the EMU Ballroom, and then said, "No, I'm not that kind of boy."

Callahan is a widely-published cartoonist and author with a reputation for being politically incorrect, and he came to campus as part of a Disability Awareness Event that was sponsored by the University's Disability Project Committee. Callahan's visit was meant to raise awareness about people with disabilities and the experiences they live through

each day.

"People in wheelchairs are just really invisible on this campus and in the community at large," said Nilda Brooklyn, a sophomore women's studies and art major who helped coordinate Callahan's visit.

A cartoonist from a young age, Callahan has been in a wheelchair since he was involved in a car accident when he was 21 years old. His work has been published in over 75 magazines and newspapers across the country.

In addition, his recent biography, "Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot," was on the New York Times Bestseller List and is in the process of being made into a movie starring Robin Williams.

During his time on-stage, Callahan recounted amusing anecdotes, presented a slide show that included his work as well as letters from grateful fans and angry opponents. He also responded to questions from the audience.

"He discusses a wide variety of topics that we thought were really important to discuss through humor," ASUO Multicultural Associate Katie Howard said. "He has a

way of reaching people through humor and making it funny as well as thought-provoking."

Callahan's cartoons range from political to religious commentary, not to mention his own personal observations, and they poke fun at anything from Viagra to Sally Struthers. At least one audience member in a wheelchair—several such attendees were in the crowd—found humor in Callahan's observations on life.

"It takes a lot more courage to speak the truth than to be politically correct," local resident Michael Ellis said.

Courage is something that Callahan evidently has. His cartoons take leaps that sometimes end in Callahan's strip being removed from a publication.

Most recently a strip in the Miami Herald got him "kicked right out of town," Callahan said. He contends the cartoon was a respectful rather than inflammatory gesture toward the late Martin Luther King, Jr. and didn't agree with the offense many were taking.

"You take your chances, I guess," he said. "I don't apologize

for that."

Callahan credits his sense of humor to genetics rather than to a sudden revelation during the accident that paralyzed him. He said that it was his mother who was really funny.

"It's not like you roll out of a car or something and say 'God damn, I'd better get a sense of humor quick!,'" he said.

Aside from explaining his humor and showcasing his cartoons, Callahan was also able to shed some light on what it is like to be handicapped.

He claimed that people have become used to people in wheelchairs and handicapped people. Waiting in a movie line, kids sometimes lean up against him and even sit on his lap.

He also discussed his run for state representative in Portland four years ago. Callahan, in another example of poking fun at himself as well as others, said many people were behind him, including a large portion of the homosexual community.

"I think the gays called themselves the Fruits for a Vegetable," he said.



Courtesy of John Callahan

Callahan employed that type of humor throughout his presentation and said he continues to use it in his cartoons.

"John Callahan doesn't just grab your attention," said Molly Sirios, an assistant counselor with Disability Services. "He holds it hostage."

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