

"Paradise Valley was pretentious, conservative and Republican. I was raised to be a sorority girl. My mom and I are sorority sisters."

—Gina "Lipstick" Daggett



Belge (left) and Daggett host a Seattle Girl4Girl cancer fund-raiser.

Unlike many writers' angst-ridden paths to success, how Daggett and Belge have gotten to this point is a story of discovery and good fortune. The Portland pair actually met at a pizza party get-together for freelance contributors to *Just Out*.

"She made fun of my sweater, and I made fun of her jeans," says Daggett. Of the Lipstick & Dipstick partnership, she explains: "We never started this as friends. We started working and became friends."

The writers come from considerably different backgrounds, a contrast that continually informs their work and has helped shape their perspectives and personalities.

Belge was raised in working-class Syracuse, N.Y., with seven siblings including a twin sister. "There's another Dipstick running around out there," laughs Daggett.

Even though Belge moved to Portland 14 years ago, the imprint of her formative years is clear. "It was a community committed to social justice and the peace movement. My parents worked in a homeless shelter. It instilled in me a lot about privilege," says Belge. "Being from there has given me a lot to draw from."

She worked for 10 years counseling queer youth and their families as well as facilitating support groups before moving into writing full time. "My parents actually discouraged me from being a writer and going into journalism," says Belge.

Daggett couldn't be more opposite, growing up with one brother in Paradise Valley, Ariz., where she spent her time going to the mall and shopping with friends. She moved to Portland eight years ago.

"Paradise Valley was pretentious, conservative and Republican. I was raised to be a sorority girl. My mom and I are sorority sisters," says Daggett.

She had been tossing around the idea of doing something related to the butch/femme dynamic. After meeting, Daggett and Belge started talking about doing a project together and came up with the idea of Lipstick & Dipstick, two strong voices representing different places on the butch/femme spectrum. The characters "are alter egos, inflated parts of ourselves," says Belge.

Daggett finds her Lipstick persona differs from herself in some ways: "We think differently in character. Lipstick sometimes says things I can't believe... Lipstick is not quite so serious; she's playful and a little ditz."

The two had their vantage points established but were still looking for the engine to kick the column into gear when they tried the idea of offering counsel to readers. "We struggled a little bit with just a butch/femme column, and when it became about advice, it just started to flow really well," says Belge.

Daggett, who enforced policies and ideals as vice president of standards for her sorority, found herself equipped with a great amount of experience for an advice column: "I enjoy telling

people what to do. I was born with inherent wisdom, and Dipstick has earned hers!"

It was one thing to offer advice about lesbian relationships from their respective femme and butch perspectives, but it had to be delivered in a way that was engaging for both the creators and the readers. The duo found that humor, for the most part, was missing from existing advice columns. "We wanted to make people laugh, too, to create a pairing of advice and humor," says Daggett.

The choice to create characters who would dispense advice from butch and femme perspectives was actually a decision made with the hope of opening up the spectrum of lesbian experience.

"We weren't sure if the name Dipstick would seem derogatory," says Daggett. And Belge has been redefining the word ever since, giving readers smart responses full of the honesty they've come to expect from her.

"Who we are is ingrained in so many things," says Belge. "Identity is subjective, and so we have to be delicate and not presumptive about things."

Daggett quickly adds: "Yeah, I do more home improvement than she does. It's all about shades."

"What a butch is to me isn't what it is to anyone else. The beauty of our community is that we can have identities and not fall into boxes," says Belge.

With the idea for a column in place, Daggett and Belge invited close friends who were "creative types" to get together and start brainstorming ideas for the column. Of that night Daggett recalls, "Even then, you could just feel it was going somewhere."

The two started putting columns together and creating a promotional packet with the hope of getting it syndicated. After getting turned down by *Just Out*, Daggett and Belge decided to regroup and get some advice from a friendly resource on their materials and how they could revamp them to enhance their appeal. They were starting to feel like the column was going nowhere.

"But we believed in it," says Belge.

The friendly resource was none other than Diane Anderson-Minshall, executive editor at *Curve*. Instead of advice, she called and asked if the magazine could just pick up the column. Daggett and Belge happily agreed. Over time, Lipstick & Dipstick's column was syndicated in additional publications, but these others eventually narrowed to one in Columbus, Ohio.

"We were writing a column every two weeks for \$25 and started thinking about putting energy into a book," says Belge. Again, serendipity stepped in.

The two were kicking around the idea of a book and had started putting together a proposal when Alyson Books approached

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