

# people

## Laughing Matters

Air America host headlines Equity Foundation benefit

by Floyd Sklaver

**C**omedy veteran Carl Wolfson is proof positive that it pays to be in the right place at the right time. After headlining at comedy clubs nationwide for more than 20 years, he escaped the frenzy of Los Angeles for Portland, where he finally got a break from his nomadic life when KPOJ-FM, the local affiliate of Air America, offered him a job as early morning host. So Wolfson happily traded in 3 a.m. bedtimes for 3 a.m. wake-up calls.

I recently sat down with him in his Irvington townhouse packed with political books to learn more about life as a standup, beginning with his start at The Comedy Store back in 1980.

**Carl Wolfson:** Mitzi Shore, the owner, liked me and made me a paid regular. She was also Pauly Shore's mom; I used to baby-sit Pauly when he was young. Back then, every night it was Robin Williams, Richard Pryor, Rodney Dangerfield. I was so nervous. My first paid spot in the original room, prime time, 10 o'clock. Steve Martin comes in and goes on in front of me. He did half an hour. When he left the stage everyone followed him out to get his autograph. So then I went up and nobody listened to a damn word I said.

**Floyd Sklaver:** It's easy to make jokes about

Hillary Clinton, John McCain and Mike Huckabee. But how do you make jokes about Barack Obama?

**CW:** I'm not sure I've made a lot of jokes about Obama per se, but he works his way into jokes. For instance, I say about political books, "Barack Obama has *The Audacity of Hope*, and Hillary Clinton has *It Takes a Village to Please My Husband*."

My opening line now, and I do a lot of Democratic groups that draw big crowds, is "Gosh, there are so many people here, you'd think we were waterboarding Dick Cheney."

**FS:** After 28 years, do you repeat jokes and change the references?

**CW:** Yes, for instance, the religious right, like Ted Haggard. I used to do a line back [in the '80s]: "Jim Bakker or Jimmy Swaggart got caught with a prostitute. So now we know how all those Bibles got into hotel rooms." And I can adapt it to today with Ted Haggard.

**FS:** What do you like most about your new gig?

**CW:** Mostly I'm grateful for being off the road. I was on stage in Richland, Wash., doing my dog-and-pony show. A woman in the back yelled out she had

a lab. I said, "What kind?" She said, "Meth." It's a reality check.

**FS:** Standup is a notoriously macho environment. What was it like as a gay man?

**CW:** People in Hollywood didn't give a shit if you were gay, and that was one of the great things about the comedy stage. You could be African American, you could be a housewife like Roseanne, you could be gay. The stage gives you the chance to have any point of view you want.

**FS:** But what about the road?

**CW:** In 1984 or '85 I played a little club in Amarillo, Texas. I didn't talk about being gay on stage, but after one of the shows there was a waitress who was lesbian. We went out to a bar, and I'll never forget this. We were leaving the bar at 1 in the morning, and there were these people parked in pickups and she goes: "Do not look at them. Look down. Look away. Walk straight." She told me they're Sally-smashers—guys who come in from the country to beat up fags.



Carl Wolfson (right, with partner Gary Thill) got his big break as a standup comedian 28 years ago at The Comedy Store in Los Angeles.

**FS:** What stands out as a high point of your 6,000-plus comedy appearances?

**CW:** I have to say a high point of my career was when I came out on the show. I was doing an interview with John Hummel, who was just about to come to Portland to be the executive director of Basic Rights Oregon. He was talking about his partner. So I said: "Well, I should tell you. I'm a gay man. My partner and I have been together nine years." And I actually felt very good about doing that on radio because I just don't hear a lot of out gay men or women in the media. **10**

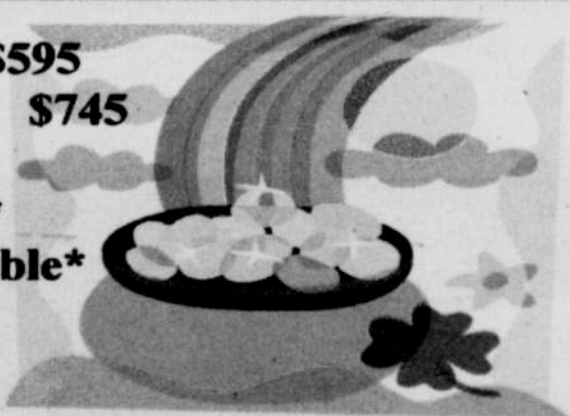
Carl Wolfson will appear at Equity Foundation's INVESTMENTS IN DIGNITY benefit 5:30 p.m. March 13 in Gerding Theater at the Armory, 128 N.W. 11th Ave. Tickets are \$65 from 503-231-5759.

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