

Doing it for the Laughs *continued from front page*

yourself happy in it, you'll just be a miserable person."

She spent time in rehab, where she met her husband Sam. Sam has been sober for 23 years, but Dianna struggled for several years before finally finding a way to stay clean. "Sam kept calling the police on me and having me arrested and I finally got tired of going to jail. So I got sober in 2001."

In 2018, Potter says she was turning 60 and decided she wanted to do something special. "I had spent 20 years as a drunk, and then I've been sober for 20 years. And I wanted to do something for my 60th year. I decided I was going to live my dream. I looked online and saw that the Helium Comedy Club had comedy classes. I took Stand Up 101 and Stand Up 200. They don't teach you how to be funny, they teach you how to write your material. You get up on stage right away and the instructor and class give you feedback. My brother likes to joke with me that, 'I'm funny too, but I didn't have to go to school for it!' But the school teaches you what you don't already have, because you can't teach somebody to be funny. You get to watch other comedians. It gave me a stage to go onto and help me with my material and find out what stories are funny. I had a story where I was making fun of a lady who was complaining about a restaurant not having gluten free bread, and the rest of the class was like, 'Making fun of celiac disease is not funny.' So, I took classes for six months and did a few gigs and then I entered my first contest."

Early on she also spent time practicing her material by going to a regular open mic night at Kelly's Olympian, a bar in downtown Portland. "You're mostly in front of a bunch of other comics there, it's not really an audience," she explains. "It's real hard to get up there because they don't laugh at your stuff, so it toughens you up."

Potter is a natural storyteller, with a gift for comedic timing and delivery, and a comfortable and professional stage presence. "The first class I took, the teacher said, 'You're a natural at this.' I've always told stories and always told jokes, just without a stage."

In the Portland's Funniest Person contest, preliminary rounds are voted on by audience members with the top few comics advancing to the next round. The semifinal round has a panel

of judges from regional radio stations, television, and the entertainment and arts industries, with the best 12 comics selected for the finals. "I made it to the final 12 that first year, which was pretty bizarre," says Potter. "I really didn't know about the rules of comedy – what you're supposed to do and how it worked. And people were like, 'Where did you come from?' People who had been doing this for years didn't make it to the semifinals. Now that I know more about the comedy business, it was kind of a miracle I made it that far that first year."

Following her finals performance she was named by the *Willamette Week* as one of the "Indisputable Geniuses of Comedy," in the Portland area and performed at Revolution Hall in front of 750 people.

When 2021 rolled around Dianna said she wanted to prove to herself that her success in 2019 wasn't a fluke. "It was really scary, but I made it to the semifinals again and did one of my best sets ever – I have that posted on my YouTube channel and it has almost 10,000 views!" In the finals, Dianna says she drew the first spot on the bill and had to be the first comic on the stage. "I found out it's called the 'bullet spot' which is the dreaded spot in comedy. People aren't drunk enough yet," she says with a laugh. Although she didn't place in the top three, she says she accomplished her goal of getting back to the finals. "I wanted people to see, and I wanted to prove to myself, that this was something I was good at. The audience liked me and obviously the judges did too."

The Western Oregon Comedy Competition requires comics to apply, and Dianna was selected in 2020, where she won her first round in March; the rest of that competition was cancelled. She entered again in 2021, tied for first place in the first round, and then won the final in an audience vote.

Her success in those two regional competitions is now helping Dianna get actual paying work as a stand up comic. In December she did several shows in Portland and as 2021 drew to a close she says she had six shows scheduled in January, although two had just been canceled. Over the Christmas holiday she traveled to Arizona to visit family and did a set at a club there. Later in January she was heading to Turner and Fall, Oregon for shows.

She'll also begin hosting her own monthly comedy showcase on the third Thursday of each month at Growler Guys in Portland's southwest riverfront district, where she'll be responsible for booking the comedy acts and perform a set herself. "They have like 40 different beers on tap and food and I'm scheduled to have my first show there on January 15th," she says.

Potter's comedy material, like a lot of stand up comedy, is not for everyone, and it certainly isn't family friendly. In a time where comedians have to contend with political correctness routines and be careful who they make fun of, Potter often uses her own troubled past and the true stories from her experiences to create her material. A typical set might include jokes about feminine hygiene and grooming, time spent in the Multnomah County jail, getting a stalking order cleared from her record so she could apply for a job at the TSA, and getting arrested for shoplifting a bottle of vodka after hiding it in her child's baby stroller.

"I talk about myself and I talk about spending a lot of time in jail because of my drinking," says Potter. "I've always made it a point my whole life to not offend anyone. I don't punch down on myself either. Even if I'm going to make fun of myself I try to do it in a happy way. I just try to make fun of the dumb mistakes I've made. I'm not embarrassed or I don't make any secret about my past, and people can see that,

now that I'm clean and sober. I tell true stories about things that have happened to me – they might just be a little bit embellished or exaggerated. I don't lie about anything, but sometimes it's hard to turn a true story into a joke."

Potter says most of these shows she's performing do pay their performers. "You may only get 10 bucks. Most of the time you don't know what you're going to get, because they split a cover charge and tips. Sometimes the club pays you a fee. I've made as much as \$100 for a 15 minute set and as little as five bucks. I don't do it for the money."

One of her strangest gigs was when she recently played at the Red Velvet in Portland, which calls itself a "Lifestyle Club" but is really a sex club. "Have you ever heard of it?" she asked – quickly adding, "I'm not trying to trick you!" before I could answer. "It was totally bizarre! I finished my set and then everyone just started having sex with each other! Well, not me – I left!" Dianna agreed that somewhere in that experience there was probably some good comedic material. "I just haven't figured it out yet," she says.

Potter says she is working on some more family friendly material so she can perform a cleaner set for her neighbors here in Vernonia, or "...in case I ever play an elementary school."

You can find Dianna Potter's schedule of performances on her Facebook page and on her Instagram @Diannanimal.

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