

Laughter Medicine

Comic speaks to City Club



On one of the first sunny spring days after six months of rain, the atmosphere at City Club of Eugene was positively giddy as local comic Leigh Anne Jasheway explored the human gag reflex.

“The biggest joke is it’s 64 degrees and sunny and you are all in here,” Jasheway told the seasonally affected crowd gathered atop the Eugene Hilton on April Fool’s Day.

With a fake flower wrapped around her head, Jasheway launched right into the jokes. “This is the only place in the world where tie dye is considered a neutral color,” she said.

Jasheway, an old Eugene Celebration Slug Queen, said in Eugene you can get gussied up as the royal gastropod and “nobody even notices.”

Jasheway said she tried the hormone therapy patch to control hot flashes but it didn’t work. “I wore it over my left eye for a week.”

Jasheway said people are peppered daily by angry talk radio and news media reminding us to be “angry or to panic.” People need a humor antidote, she said, noting “levity is the opposite of gravity.”

“There is too much going on in the world that it’s too hard to process without an element of comedy to it,” she said, pointing to the success of comedy news shows.

Jasheway said she appreciates a good joke. Once, she said she commanded her wiener dog to “stay” while getting out of her car in a parking lot. “You know, I just usually put my car in park,” a bystander commented.

Five-year-olds laugh 400 to 500 times a day while grownups laugh only 15 times a day on average, Jasheway said, citing research. About 40 percent of adults laugh only once a day, while another 40 percent push the average up by laughing 90 times a day, she said. “Why is it 5-year-olds are so much smarter than we are?”

“We need to engage more frequently with our sense of humor,” Jasheway said. She said other research had shown that laughter helps with tension headaches, diabetes and colds. “It’s better than a flu shot,” she said.

Laughter also helps with fertility between the sheets, according to Jasheway. “If you are trying not to conceive, do not watch funny things at night.”

“It’s simply about opening yourself up to finding more things funny,” Jasheway said. “When we type LOL, we are not actually LOLing.”

Jasheway said that research has shown that laughter produces basic mammalian benefits of reducing tension and fear, and bonding within groups. “Go on YouTube and type rats laughing,” she said of one experiment with a grinning researcher tickling rodents.

Inspired, Jasheway said she got down at ground level with her wiener dog to try and make him laugh — heh, heh, heh — when a delivery man walked to the door. “I guarantee you, that is a good way to make a UPS man laugh.”

Jasheway said she doesn’t know how to make your cat laugh. “Nobody owns a cat.”

Jasheway said adults carry too much “negative baggage around” to enjoy laughter like kids. She said a server once apologized to her obese friend for the long line at Burger King. “Sorry for the wait,” she said. “Honey, I have weighed this much for so long it really doesn’t bother me anymore,” he replied.

City Club members rose to the occasion with humorous questions. “I have been a City Club member since before the City Club was a joke,” quipped Arnold Ismach, former UO journalism dean.

The City Club video cameraman pulled his sweatshirt over his head and Nancy Willard, another former Slug Queen, sang a few lines of what sounded like opera.

“You catch the mood of the people you spend the most time with,” Jasheway said. “You might consider dumping a depressing friend,” she recommended.

Or, Jasheway, said, find laughing children to spend more time with. “Do not stalk children, make sure it is children you know.”

Jasheway said, like many women, she prefers the self-deprecating humor over the sarcastic “rant comic” humor. She said she was once in a bathroom stall when she exchanged banter with a woman in the next stall. “How are you?” the woman asked. Then the stall neighbor asked, “What are you doing?” Then, “Can I come over?”

Finally, the woman said, “I have to hang up now, there’s a moron in the stall next to me.”

EWEB Commissioner Bob Cassidy asked Jasheway for a joke to make a certain dispassionate reporter, who shall go unnamed, laugh. It was something about a squirrel in her underwear. **EW**

Toxic World

From cancer to kids to fossil fuels

A cancer survivor, a mother, a biologist and a poet, Sandra Steingraber brings her unique perspective on the environment, toxics, fossil fuels and children to Eugene April 28 in an event, “Human Rights and The Environment: An Evening with Dr. Sandra Steingraber,” hosted by Oregon Toxics Alliance.

Steingraber is the author of *Living Downstream: An Ecologist’s Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*. She says at age 20, as a high achieving pre-med undergrad, she was diagnosed with bladder cancer. “I changed my career plan,” she says, “I no longer wanted the hospital to be my workplace.”

But her scientific urge to investigate was not changed. She was not the only family member to be diagnosed with cancer, she says. Her aunt died of the same bladder cancer and her mother had breast cancer. But Steingraber herself was not biologically related to either woman; she was adopted. “I became really interested in the presumption that cancer must be hereditary.” She began to research environmental exposures and write *Living Downstream*.

Her later-in-life pregnancies also become fodder for books. “I loved being pregnant and I was really good at it,” she says. And as someone who had lived through cancer, she says it was eye-opening to lie on the same ultrasound table at the same hospital where she had been scanned for signs of tumor and to have her baby scanned, and see “signs of growth as a good thing, not a bad thing.”

In her books *Having Faith* and most recently *Raising Elijah: Protecting Our Children in an Age of Environmental Crisis*, Steingraber explores issues such as the effects of exposure to chemicals early in life, chemicals that interfere with cell growth and “can enter the placenta of a developing baby and alter signaling pathways of the way the body gets itself assembled.”

Of concern to Oregonians, as the proposed ban on Bisphenol-A (BPA) from baby bottles and sippy cups is debated in the Legislature, is Steingraber’s research on “a number of chemicals that at very low levels have the ability to alter hormonal signals.” She compares them to a very tiny baton directing a huge orchestra in their “really disproportionate effects on our body.”

In the case of BPA she says, there are “really troubling animal studies. In early life BPA can alter the development of a mammary gland so that an animal is more sensitive and vulnerable to cancer.”

In her books Steingraber investigates raising children in a toxic, unstable world. *Raising Elijah*, which is due to be released on Earth Day, ranges in topics from pesticides, which Steingraber points out are “poisons by design,” to hydraulic fracking.

Fracking, she says, is a process that injects toxic chemicals into the ground, potentially mixing with groundwater. As industries drill for natural gas, fracking uses many of the chemicals she is concerned about. “I am a fracking abolitionist,” Steingraber says, “I am not interested in helping the gas industry to do this in a better way.”

Oregon is not a hotbed of fracking, but there are current fights to block natural gas pipelines and liquefied natural gas terminals connected to the natural gas mining industry.

Fracking, she says, is like “an abusive drunk who lives in a family and who is almost about to go to Alcoholics Anonymous,” but discovers a cache of alcohol in the basement. The drunk plans to blow up the basement to get to it. “What is the right response of the family?” she asks. “To help regulate the detonation of the basement?” or to get the drunk to AA?

“Obviously I’m for rehab,” she says.

When it comes to the toxics in the environment that groups like OTA seek to prevent, she says, “Parents have the most at stake as it’s our children that are being poisoned.”

One of Oregon Toxics Alliance’s strengths, she says, is in “making people understand that behind every data point is a human life. Issues of toxics affect our communities and affect our health.”

Families, Steingraber says, can’t be “little bubbles in toxic world. You can’t protect your children that way; you have to transform your whole community.”

Sandra Steingraber, who has been lauded by the Sierra Club as a new Rachel Carson, speaks at 7 pm Thursday, April 28, at the UO’s Robinson Theatre, \$11, \$9 students or free to the first 20 people who join or renew their OTA membership. Leading up to the talk, the Bijou will be showing the movie *Living Downstream* based on Steingraber’s book of the same name on April 17, 22, 23 and 24. — *Camilla Mortensen*

For more info go to www.oregontoxics.org/SandraS.html

