

The Wichita Eagle

Family taught her value of humor

Father and brothers helped steer Kelly into comedy career

By Susan L. Rife
The Wichita Eagle

You show me a stand-up comic, I'll show you someone who was a geek in high school," says geek-turned-comic Marian Kelly.

Kelly, a native of Seneca, Mo., will bring her stand-up routine, including jokes about one-stoplight towns and relationship problems, to Slapstix Comedy Club tonight through Saturday.

"If you have looks or an athletic ability, you can get by in life without a sense of humor," said Kelly. But those of us without those gifts learn to develop whatever talents we have.

In Kelly's case, it was a genetic legacy.

The eighth of 10 children — and the first girl — she inherited her sense of humor from her father, who died when she was 7.



Kelly

"My brothers especially value a joke above all else," she said from a Des Moines hotel room. "My dad, I'm told, had a real wild sense of humor."

Kelly's reputation as a wisecrack preceded her even in grade school. In the third grade, she once made a wisecrack in class and the boy in front of her turned around and said, "You can do better than that."

But she entertained no thoughts of a career as a stand-up comic

when she set off to college in Joplin.

"I had no idea it was possible to do whatever you wanted to do," she said. "My default ambition if I couldn't come up with anything better was, I was going to be a schoolteacher."

She majored in English at Missouri Southern State College, was booted out for two semesters because of bad grades, came back as a business major and went to work as a director at a Joplin television station.

It wasn't until she moved to Springfield to work for the Muscular Dystrophy Association that she began to consider comedy as a career. She went on stage for the first time at a Springfield comedy club's amateur night in 1987.

"My very first goal was (that) the very minimum I have to be is different," she said, "trying to talk about things I didn't think anyone else was talking about. It worked."

TICKET INFORMATION

WHO: Marian Kelly
WHERE: Slapstix Comedy Club, 2120 N. Woodlawn
WHEN: Tonight through Saturday
HOW MUCH: Call 686-4242 for show times and ticket prices

Kelly said it's easier to be funny when she sticks with what strikes her as humorous rather than trying to guess what an audience will laugh at.

"I'm not going to rely on what I think the audience is going to buy," she said. "When I didn't have a frame of reference, I was writing more, and writing more creatively."

Kelly stays as far away from

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shock comedy as she can.

"I would call that my biggest strength right there," she said. "It's a lot harder to write comedy that's clean. Anybody can write a dirty joke and get a laugh — your grandmother could do it."

Much to her surprise, the G rating she gave herself worked to her advantage. When comedy club owners commented on the straightness of her act, she said, "Wait a minute, is that some kind of novelty?" And it turns out it is.

Kelly, who's 34 and still single after breaking up last year with her boyfriend (not quite good grist for the comedy mill, she says), aspires to an acting career. She's planning to build a nest egg that will allow

her to move from Seneca to Los Angeles.

But she's willing to take her time with her career.

After all, she said, "It took me until I was 28 to set foot on the soil of my dreams."