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Issue 19
January / February 2013
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The Reverend Mother

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Confessions of Reverend Mother

Laughter is the best medicine if you ask nun-turned-entertainer Phyllis Lee Contestable

By Amy Cavalier

Phyllis Lee Contestable entered the convent in 1964. However, it wasn't until years after she left the order that she discovered her calling.

Through comedy, music and

compassion, entertainer Contestable has touched thousands of lives. She's a "genuine local hero," said Downstairs Cabaret Theatre Director Chris Kawolsky.

"I've sometimes said she could have run for mayor of Rochester any time because so many people know and love her," he said.

From national casino tours to long-running gigs at area clubs and restaurants, Contestable's musical talent and humor has taken her all over the country. Performing in a cabaret-style duo with Alan Jones for 32 years, they have opened for the likes of Bill Cosby, Rich Little and Jackie Mason, and

they've appeared as guest artists with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra on three different occasions.

Contestable, 66, is now most recognizable, or unrecognizable as Reverend Mother, the lead character in the 1986 off-Broadway cast of "Nunsense" in Rochester.

"She has played that role many times, as have many actresses, but I think she took it to the next level when she created her own Reverend Mother persona and took her on the road," said Jim Vollertsen, president and executive director of the Rochester Association of the Performing Arts. "Phyl truly is the Reverend Mother."

Reverend Mother has revived the art of roasting individuals, a fashion made famous by The Friars Club and Dean Martin in the 1960s and '70s. With her "spiritually fractured, outrageously irreverent, warmly wacky, endearingly devilish humor" and passionate commitment, she's



Phyllis Contestable in her old white habit after she entered the Sisters of Mercy.



roasted people like Tom Golisano, former Rochester Bishop Matthew H. Clark, and she's generated thousands of dollars and laughter for cancer and hospice organizations.

"It is not a coincidence, this nonsense with 'Nunsense,'" said Contestable. "I believe in destiny and that things happen for a reason. This has become a ministry."

Behind the habit

Raised in a conservative Italian family in the Cobb's Hill area in Rochester, Contestable's family spent summers at their summer home on Lake Ontario in Hilton. From lipsynching on Eddie Meath's "Dance Party" to playing the lead in school plays, it was clear from the start Phyl was destined for stardom, said her

sister Andi Contestable-Piazza.

"My sister is the person I've always tried to emulate but never really could," Contestable-Piazza said. "She's just a master."

Phyl Contestable attended Blessed Sacrament Elementary School and graduated from Our Lady of Mercy High School for girls in 1964. She was the youngest female in her class to enter the congregation of the Sisters of Mercy at the age of 17.

"I thought I was my family's ticket into heaven when I joined the convent," she said.

Drawn to music from an early age, Sister Mary Giovanni, Religious Sisters of Mercy, as she was known by her religious name, would seek out any opportunity to learn.

"Sister M. Eric offered to teach me

to play," she said. "We would hide out in the science wing of college and she would coach me on guitar," she said.

As a student at Nazareth College, Contestable got a taste of what she was missing. She would sneak off to the dorms with friends she'd met in class.

"I would borrow a girlfriend's sweatshirt and take off the headpiece," she said. "Oh to be 21!"

After graduating, Contestable began what would become an over 25-year career teaching in Catholic schools, much longer than her career as a nun. Frustrated with the slow pace in which the church was responding to reform and modernization by Pope John XXIII, Contestable left the convent in 1970.

"It wasn't happening fast enough," she said. "Patience is not one of my virtues."

Contestable's decision came as no surprise to her sister.

"We were proud of her on one hand, but I don't think any of us liked her being there because she was such a creative force," said Contestable-Piazza. "Not that it isn't a wonderful vocation, but it wasn't really for her. It was too stifling. My sister is such an amazing entertainer."

Bright lights, big cities

Practically overnight, Contestable went from playing guitar as a nun at Immaculate Conception to playing at a club called The Nugget. It was the weekend of the big opening when she got a call from a panicked Lee Grills, the club owner who knew her from church, desperate for entertainment.

She and her sister put together a sing-a-long duo with hootenanny songs, complete with sing-along sheets.

"Before we knew it, we became a rock band called The Summerville Pier and stayed there as a regular act for over two years, playing three nights a week," said Contestable.

Teaching music full-time at Good Shepherd Elementary School combined with singing for the Summerville Pier, Contestable strained her voice and developed vocal polyps, requiring her to have surgery twice. After

Several quips from Reverend Mother:

■ On religion and spirituality:

"I would say I'm very spiritual. My relationship with God is so personal and very intense. I know who I am and I'm supposed to be doing this work."

■ On being in the convent:

"Part of being in the convent was to rid yourself of your secular identity and attachments. You took on a religious persona—another name, another look. We had to kneel and cultivate a spirit of humility to ask for personal things that we needed, like toothpaste and hygiene items. It was tough, like being in the Marines."

■ On being a kid these days:

- "It's almost like a Catch-22 for young people today. Society puts so much pressure on them to be consumers at an early age. They're almost victims of what they love—the clothes, the technology. You're giving infants computers before



they can even talk. It's feeding into the whole entitlement problem. I feel much of technology insulates kids instead of encouraging them to grow socially."

■ Reverend Mother borrows from Dr. Seuss on aging:

"I cannot see, I cannot pee, I cannot chew, I cannot ... well, it rhymes with chew. Oh my God what can I do? My memory shrinks, my hearing stinks. No sense of smell, I look like hell. My body's drooping; I have trouble pooping. The golden years have come at last. The golden years can kiss my ... butt."

she recovered, she started doing “lighter” music with her own lounge trio Three’s a Crowd for close to six years.

In 1979, she joined up with her sister, a Janis Joplin/Barbra Streisand-type, touring with her show band, The Apple Band. Doing the casino circuit—Atlantic City, Reno, Vegas—wasn’t glamorous by any means.

“We would be at the Bonaventure Hotel in Montreal for two weeks at a fabulous gig, and then we’d have the week off, but our next gig was in Key West, Fla., so you’d spend the money you had just made for expenses to get to Florida,” she said.

Performing the graveyard shift from midnight to 5 or 6 a.m., Contestable recalls rubbing elbows with the big stars performing in the main rooms—Cher, Tom Jones, Ella Fitzgerald, George Benson. She left the group after two years and followed her voice into cabaret, lounge singing and theater.

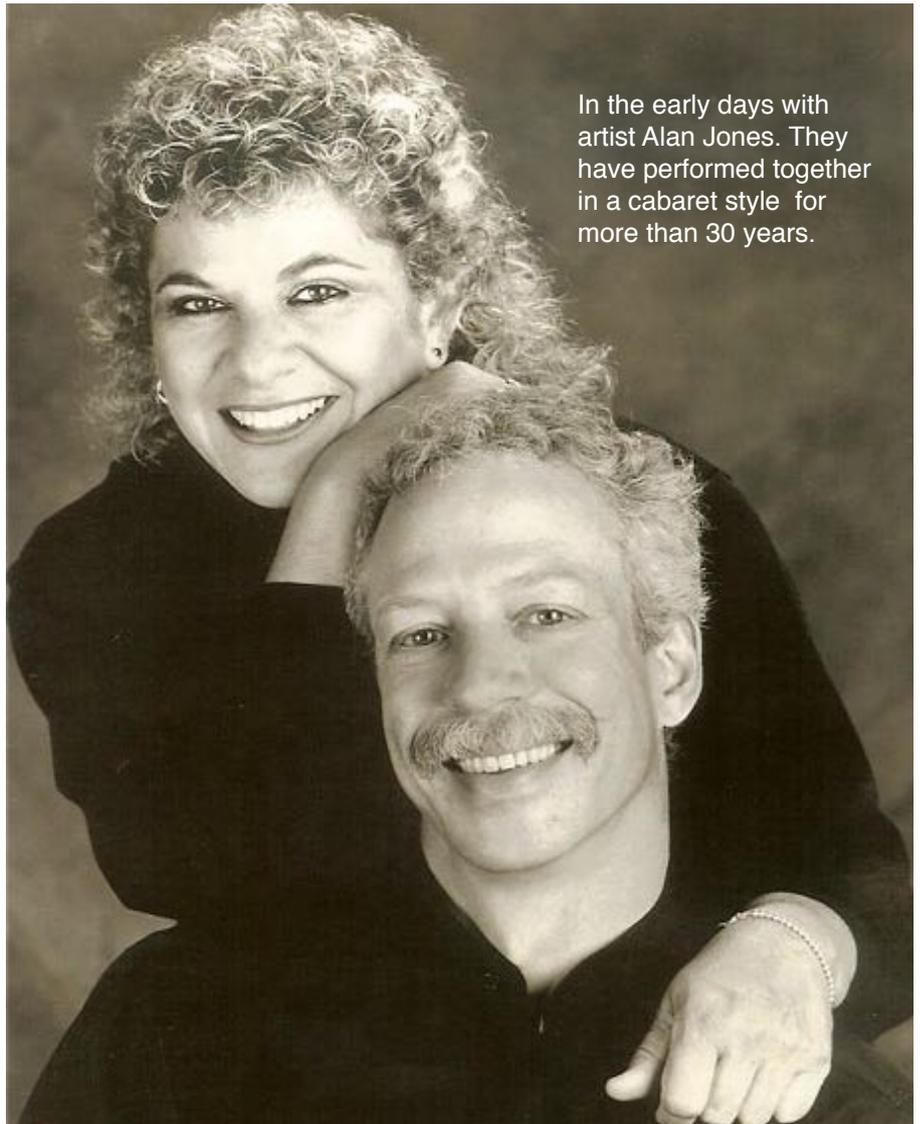
In 1980, she married John McNeill, a percussionist with the RPO. The couple was together for 10 years. McNeil’s father Ken, a talent agent, introduced her to Alan Jones. The two formed a duo that she describes as “grand piano and two voices, naughty, bawdy and bold cabaret music, up-close and personal, light and lovely ballads, suggestive show tunes, and double entendre songs” like “He Can’t Fill Her Up Anymore.” It’s a song about a guy who owns a gas station during the gasoline shortage from the off-Broadway musical “What’s a Nice Country Like You Doing in a State Like This.”

Jones and Contestable have performed at resorts in the Thousand Islands and in Atlantic City over the years and at times, Reverend Mother will make a guest appearance.

Enter Reverend Mother

In 1986, Contestable got involved in the off-Broadway productions of “Nunsense,” destined to open in Rochester. Her friend Corinne Aquilina, the music director, convinced a reluctant Contestable to audition.

Contestable recalls the director commenting, “You’re so real. You



In the early days with artist Alan Jones. They have performed together in a cabaret style for more than 30 years.

do things with your hands and hold your body in such a way that establishes your credibility of this character. You’re doing things that other professional actresses just wouldn’t know to do. You must have really studied for this part.”

The director had not read her resume in advance of the audition and had no idea she had been a vowed member of the Rochester Sisters of Mercy.

“It was the right part at the right time with the right background,” she said.

Being a member of the cast earned her entry into the Actors’ Equity Association of the United States,

ranking her among professional actors. From 1986 to 1989, she starred as Reverend Mother in “Nunsense” at the Downstairs Cabaret.

“Historically, nuns have been portrayed in an extremely sanctimoniously way,” she said. “This show exposes the human side to church life.”

Although some might call “Nunsense” and Reverend Mother’s style of humor “irreverent,” Nancy Whitley, a sister of Mercy, said Contestable puts her heart and soul into everything she does, and it shows.

“She’s got the background,” said Whitley. “She grew up in the Catholic

tradition and experienced how sisters responded in classrooms. She can bring out the best of humor and also do it in good taste."

Kawolsky met Contestable in 1992 when the Downstairs Cabaret Theatre brought back a revival of "Nonsense," a production that he said has saved the Downstairs Cabaret Theatre several times.

"It's really kept it alive," he said. "It's more than just about selling tickets. 'Nonsense' is one of our signature productions. Certainly Phyl has had a significant role in that."

Most of the "Nonsense" cast was from New York City. Rochester being Contestable's hometown, she often went off script to include members of the audience, calling on people like Bishop Joseph Lloyd Hogan, who served as bishop of Rochester from 1969 to 1978, her superior Mother Mary Bride, the mayor, city officials,

friends from elementary school and other dignitaries.

"She was the heart and soul of 'Nonsense' playing the role of Reverend Mother," Kawolsky said. "Being a past nun, she was the in-house expert on the Catholic religion and nuns in a convent. I think all of the girls that have floated through 'Nonsense' just looked up to Phyl."

Teaching by day and appearing in three to seven shows a week, Contestable eventually left "Nonsense." The show went on without her, becoming the longest running show in Rochester history.

Living a double life

After she left the order, Contestable continued working in Catholic schools for 26 years, teaching general music and voice at St. James, St. Helens,

Good Shepherd, Mercy High School and St. Joe's in Penfield.

When she isn't channeling Reverend Mother, singing with Jones, she's "Ms. Phyl," a full-time general music and integrated arts teacher in the Churchville-Chili Middle School. She has a K-12 master's degree in vocal/interdisciplinary arts for children.

Joseph Hoff, a middle school educator and consultant, hired Contestable when he was a middle school principal in the Churchville-Chili Central School District.

"She inspires and motivates other people and she also draws people who like to laugh around her," said Hoff.

Contestable received the 2000 Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra Music Teacher of the Year award as an outstanding creative classroom music specialist and has been featured as a Fox TV teacher of the week. The Italian-American Community Center honored her with the 2003 Women of the Year in the Arts award.

Contestable's "holistic approach" to teaching, as she describes it, integrates theater, public speaking, music and arts. Whether you want to pursue songwriting, show business or Web design, she encourages students to cultivate an appreciation for the importance of reading.

"I tell kids to read everything you can get your hands on—candy wrappers, cereal boxes—it doesn't matter," she said. "I once got through a roast about skateboarding by reading an article about Tony Hawk in the doctor's office."

Laughing through the years

Five years ago, Contestable inherited her childhood summer home on Lake Ontario in Hilton. At the suggestion of Susan Hodes, a friend who is an oncology nurse, Contestable offered her home as a place of solitude and refuge for cancer survivors or those struggling with the disease.

"It's a place for people to come, recharge and meet other survivors," she said.

'Phyl' as seen through the eyes of others

Phyllis Lee Contestable, also known as the Reverend Mother, has certainly impacted many people throughout her illustrious career. Here are some observations from those close to her:

"I don't think that we realized until we actually started working together that our voices had a blend that was unique. I certainly knew about her personality, showmanship and ability to work with an audience effectively. As we were working together, things just kind of fell into place and there was a chemistry there that revealed itself."

— Alan Jones

"She was the heart and soul of 'Nonsense' playing the role of Reverend Mother. Being a past nun, she was the in-house expert on

the Catholic religion and nuns in a convent. I think all of the girls that have floated through 'Nonsense' just looked up to Phyl."

— Chris Kawolsky

"Everybody has their little oddities that people love them for and she somehow sniffs them out. It's always been in the best taste and in a very gentle and loving way.

— Suzanne Johnston

"Despite the fact that she's been doing this for 40 years, it's still fresh, new and delightful between her and the kids. Every lesson is a story that's unfolding and she has the ability to take that story and develop it to the fullest."

— Joseph Hoff



Terry Werth visited The Healing Place in the spring of 2010 during her own battle with breast cancer. She's also brought friends there, some who have since died. A writer, Werth was inspired to write a poem "No Oars" after spotting a boat without oars at Contestable's lakehouse.

"That's what it felt like to be a cancer patient, to be in a boat with no oars," said Werth. "That really struck me as contrary because it seemed to me to be sort of a defeatist attitude and I think I've been such a passionate fighter, emotionally, spiritually and physically. I couldn't stand to be in a boat without any oars. I wouldn't let that stop me from surviving."

No money is exchanged, no appointment needed. Some mornings, Contestable said, she wakes up to several people sitting on her patio relaxing and enjoying the sun.

"I've lost too many friends and family to this devastating disease and I feel blessed to live here at the lake and I simply want to pay it forward," Contestable said.

She said laughter is essential to maintaining a youthful spirit and positive outlook. Due to osteoarthritis, Contestable has undergone a number of joint replacements in the past few years—two knees, one hip and soon both her shoulders will be replaced, making her officially "The Bionic Reverend Mother," she jokes.

"I take my own experience in physical therapy and use it in the show," she said. "It's the parts of real life that are so absurd. You can cry about it or find the humor in a situation. It's healthier to laugh."

She chuckles recalling the night she went into the freezer for ice packs for her shoulders.

"I woke up in the morning and smelled this sweet smell," she recalls. "I had put a frozen cannoli in my armpit. I had it for breakfast."

Deb Wellington, orthopedic program director at Unity Hospital, said Contestable is like "the little engine that could."

"With her, you throw an obstacle in her way and the only question is, 'Am I going over it, around it or through it?'" said Wellington. "That's

the only choices. There's never any stopping her."

Looking forward to retirement, Contestable said she hopes Reverend Mother and cabaret entertainment with Jones will be a big part of the next phase of her career.

Wherever it is she is and whatever she's doing, there's one thing you can

count on: She'll have a smile on her face and a laugh to share.

"If you can laugh at yourself, you're a balanced, healthy person and if you can't, you have issues and I can't lift you up," she said. "Remember, the 11th commandment is lighten up."

Reverend Mother Still Rules

Phyllis Lee Contestable created quite an impact during her tenure as the Reverend Mother in "Nonsense."

Her fans, however, are not letting Reverend Mother die.

They started asking her to come into their homes to roast their family members, and now the Reverend Mother character has become larger than life.

Donned in a habit, Contestable performs roasts as Reverend Mother for everything from bar mitzvahs, retirement parties, stag and stagette parties, birthdays, divorce parties, at senior living communities, for cancer-free celebrations as well as fundraising events for the American Cancer Society, Wilmot Cancer Center, Breast Cancer Coalition and Gilda's Club.

Suzanne Johnston, president of Our Lady of Mercy High School and former principal of Wilson Magnet High School, said Contestable has a way of winning people over and capturing the lightheartedness and uniqueness of people.

In a hospice setting, "pro-bono," Contestable reviews people's lives similar to the 1950s television show, "This is Your Life." She credits the Sisters of St. Joseph with prompting her on the significance of humor in such an intense and sensitive setting.

"When you review someone's life who is terminally ill with their family present, it is so powerful, because their family is part of their journey on this earth—who they are and what they did—and then you send them back laughing. To me it's like being

on holy ground and reverencing that with that laughter," she said.

No subject is off limits for Reverend Mother. "I touch on gay and social issues, age, divorce, illness," she said. "The truth is the world is in a sad state and we need to laugh or it will kill us."

Reverend Mother has traveled the country—Montana, New Mexico, Virginia, Toronto, Florida, and even on a cruise to roast a local millionaire. She recalls details of challenging roasts, like the time she was hired to perform at a holiday party for New York City-based financial advisers Solomon Smith Barney in November 2001, shortly after Sept. 11.

"It was kind of a surreal party," she said. "There were a lot of tears and pictures of people they had lost that would have been there. Despite the recent tragedy, it was a healing experience."

Then there was the night Michael Keaton was in Pittsford at his brother Robert Douglas' birthday party. Hired to perform a roast, Contestable was unaware of the connection until she got to the event and someone told her Keaton was there.

The Rochester Business Journal hired her to grill the top-50 millionaires "50 over 50," such as Garth Fagan, the Wegmans, Golisano and the Wilmots. She had two minutes to roast each person.

"Don't tell me how wonderful they are, how many awards they've won, the same ol' same ol'," she said. "Let's talk about the corporate executive who as a 6-year-old wore his sister's tap shoes and outfit and danced in front of a full length mirror."