

Old Habits

THE REVEREND MOTHER'S COMEDY TAKES HER TO UNEXPECTED PLACES.

by Pam Sherman

Many Rochesterians know Phyl Contestable from her appearance in *Nunsense*, the long-running show at the Downstairs Cabaret Theatre. If she was convincing in the part, she had an edge: She really had been a nun. For six years, she was Sister Mary Giovanni of the Sisters of Mercy. Now she's known as the Reverend Mother—or the RevMo for short—and she still wears the habit, though in a very different way.

Contestable is a one-woman performer, getting laughs as a witty and outrageously funny nun, even hired to roast the high and mighty in town. She's also known for her appearances in support of those living with cancer. The Reverend Mother brings laughter to the unlikeliest of places, including hospitals and hospices.

To some, an irreverent, performing ex-nun is controversial. But Contestable is keeping the faith in her work. In a completely unexpected way, Contestable has managed finally to fulfill a calling from her teenage years.

As a 1964 graduate of Mercy High School, Contestable says that Vatican II and the idea that she could make a difference inspired her to become a nun. She joined the Sisters of Mercy right out of high school because they were the “roll up your sleeves and get down in the dirt” kind of nuns. “It was like being in the Marines,” she says. “We even ate in silence.”

Amid her duties polishing the brass with a toothbrush, she discovered a love for teaching music. Eventually she received a

Phyl Contestable, seen here outside her lakeside home last summer, has made an unusual career out of being an ex-nun.

PHOTO BY MATT WITTMAYER

master's degree in interdisciplinary arts for children from SUNY Brockport.

Even though she had many duties as a teacher and nun, she began performing with her guitar at public venues. "I was the original singing nun," she quips.

She soon realized that music was her first love and also, she says, "the church wasn't changing fast enough." She decided to leave the order. And she promptly went as far from the convent as she could: touring with her sister in a rock band during the 1960s and 1970s.

When she finally returned to Rochester, Contestable continued her teaching career at Churchville-Chili Middle School, where she still teaches. And she continued performing, creating a cabaret act with Alan Jones, a fellow teacher. She also married and divorced twice.

In 1986, the Downstairs Cabaret Theatre wanted to bring the comedy *Nunsense* from New York City to Rochester for a limited engagement. A friend told Contestable she should audition.

"I was not an actor, but I decided to perform my audition like a real nun," she says. When the director asked her to add an Irish brogue, she found herself channeling Mother Mary Bride Clare, the mother superior from her old convent. She got the lead part, the Reverend Mother, and performed the "limited" engagement for more than three years—one of the longest running theater shows in Rochester history.

Audience members began celebrating life occasions at the theater. They got engaged and came on their birthdays and anniversaries, and the celebrations were worked into the performances. And people began asking Contestable to perform outside the theater, in their homes, to roast their loved ones on birthdays or anniversaries, or just to cheer them up.

One young boy told her that his grandmother was depressed, but he was sure a visit from the Reverend Mother would cheer her up. Contestable got some details about Grandma, who was a *Nunsense* addict, then arrived at her house and pretended to know all about her. The boy was right; after the visit, says Contestable, Grandma couldn't stop talking about the Reverend Mother having coffee with her in her kitchen.

A young man asked her to show up at a restaurant where he was about to pop the question. His girlfriend never used to make a decision without consulting both her



PHOTOS BY KATE MELTON

The crowd reacts to the Reverend Mother's show during the Shepherd Home's entertainment night last September.

mother and her mother's best friend, who happened to be a nun, but both had passed away recently. So he asked the Reverend Mother to be there to seal the deal. She did.

That's when Contestable realized she could change people's lives. She put an ad in the *Catholic Courier* for her services as the Reverend Mother. Not everybody shared her sense of humor. The ad brought her 65 angry phone calls from people who thought she was being sacrilegious, and it led to an article questioning if humor belonged in a Catholic newspaper.

But she also got business—some of it to roast the powerful and well known in Rochester (including Tom Golisano) and beyond. After Sept. 11, Solomon Smith Barney—which lost many employees in the attack—asked her to come to New York City to perform at an event to boost morale.

Her commitment to helping those with cancer and in hospice came from her own personal loss. She says she has lost more than 70 friends to cancer.

"I felt helpless when I was losing my friends," she says. "I thought, 'I can do something. I can make them laugh.'" When her close friend Pattie, who had been in the convent with her, received a diagnosis of bone cancer, Contestable would visit often. Her friend's family members said that Contestable was the only one who could make Pattie laugh.

Contestable began working with the cancer community, never charging for her time. She visited hospices to bring some relief to the patients and their families with laughter. After performing for the Oncology Nurse Group at Rochester General Hospital's annual dinner, the nurses started calling her and asking her to come to visit

the patients at the hospital.

"Studies have shown that people live longer because of attitude," says Susan Fredericks Hodes, a nurse at Rochester General Hospital. "We have so much fun with the patients who have a sense of humor. The Reverend Mother helps to change the attitude on the treatment floor when she arrives."

Contestable says she finds making people laugh a gift. Often her jokes are improvised—divine inspiration, perhaps? For her critics who feel her irreverence is inappropriate, she points out that when she performed at the Motherhouse, the nuns loved it and gave her permission to take her prop-driven humor on the road.

Some of those props: nun-chucks, Our Lady of Guadalupe Tattoos, and a book, *The Catholic Girls' Guide to Sex*. Of course, she says, you have to know your audience.

"It's not for everybody. But if humor is part of your life, you need it. I'll show up anywhere," Contestable says.

Today, Contestable, whose mother recently died, lives in her family home in Hilton. She has begun inviting groups of cancer survivors to her lakeside home because she feels it's a healing place.

Her plan is to open her home to many more cancer survivors so they can enjoy the lake and enjoy the spirit of the place. She intends to do this not in habit as the irreverent Reverend Mother, but just as plain old Phyl Contestable—someone who wants to make a difference.

You can find Contestable at www.revमतogocom.

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Pam Sherman writes our Suburban Outlaw column.