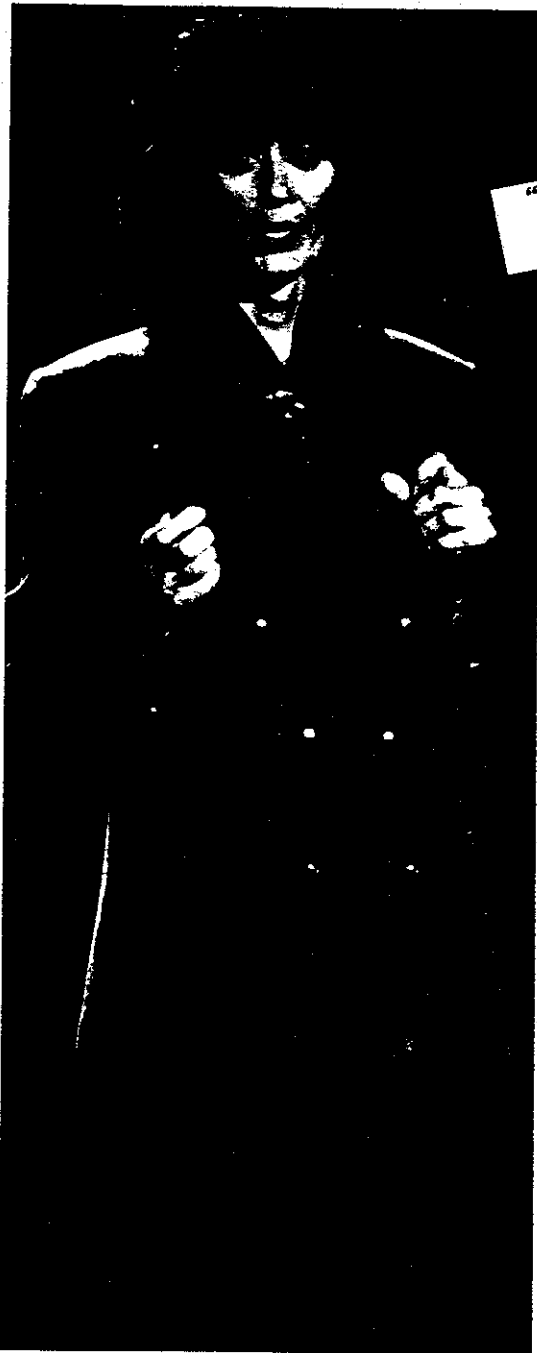


# Make 'Em Laugh

## Comedians With Disabilities Get The Chuckles— And The Understanding

By Diana Lambdin Meyer



"I'll do anything to  
see people smile."

Kathy Buckley

**Brett** Leake believes that having a degree in economics qualifies him as disabled. And, he gets a lot of laughs about that. Leake graduated from college in 1982, in the midst of an economic recession, with a bachelor's degree in economics. He couldn't find a job right away, but he did find his way to a new comedy club that had opened in his hometown of Richmond, VA. That launched the beginning of a successful career as a stand-up comedian.

Leake has another condition in life, a form of muscular dystrophy, but he doesn't see it as a disability. It's just the way things are. "There are a few snickers sometimes when I walk on stage and some nights I get mad about it, but then I get them laughing about other things in life, and, hopefully,

they recognize I am not any different than they are," he says.

Leake is one of a handful of people with disabilities who are making a hit in the difficult field of stand-up comedy. Comedy as a respected profession has grown in the last ten years, offering more outlets for all people with a passion for comedy. Between the growth of cable television channels and comedy clubs in cities of all sizes, the field is wide open for people with something to say.

"Comedy is a great way for a person to make a living if your disability allows it," states Leake. Two or three shows per night takes its toll on Leake's physical strength, but he is able to rest in the day and spend time thinking about his act.

What Leake doesn't say much about on stage is being a person with a disability. In the early

stages of his career, he found he was using jokes about his disability as a crutch, making the subject a full five minutes or more in a 45-minute routine. "Some people need to hear one or two jokes about my disability to feel comfortable with me, and some people don't," he explains. However, when Leake makes television appearances, like the four times he's been on the *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, he makes a concerted effort to explain his condition within the first few minutes on stage.

## Good Vibrations

Another comedian, Kathy Buckley, relies on the laughter of an audience to send vibrations through the floor so she can feel when she's funny. Deaf in the high frequencies since she was three years old, Buckley spent a year in a school for children with developmental disabilities before her hearing loss was discovered. "They called me slow," she says, able to joke about the mistake.

Advances in technology now allow Buckley to hear with the assistance of hearing aids, but technology has not found the answer to battery problems. One night in front of a live audience of more than 500 people, her hearing aids suddenly went dead. "Where is that stupid bunny rabbit with the drums when you really need him?" she improvised, then completed the show without hearing a sound.

As with all individuals who have hearing impairments, Buckley relies heavily on visual images. "I'll do anything to see people smile," she notes. Her rewards also come from the growing number of awards on her shelf, including a nomination for the "Best Female Stand-Up Comedienne" in the 1994 American Comedy Awards. Educating the general public through comedy is one goal of Buckley's; the other is to find herself in the starring role of her own television situation comedy.

Buckley attributes her success and that of other comedians and actors with disabilities to the enforcement American with Disabilities (ADA) laws, awareness created by people such as Marlee Matlin, and the fact that more people are speaking up about all disabilities. Trained as a massage and exercise therapist, but with aspirations as an actress, Buckley had trouble finding work in the mainstream because people were turned off by her speech and hearing impairment. The only true disability, she says, is ignorance.



*"Some people need to hear one or two jokes about my disability to feel comfortable with me, and some people don't."*

**Brett Leake**

## Great Therapy

For Buckley and other comedians with disabilities, comedy is great therapy for their insecurity. "I gain confidence little by little by little as people accept me," Buckley comments. "The laughter is wonderful after years of rejection."

Leake's confidence comes from the support he has received from his family, which includes four members with the same form of MD. Outside of his family, he has found support in the stand-up comedy community. Cut-throat competition between comedians is not much of a reality at the professional level. "Comedians been through the fire and know what works for them," he declares. "I'm not worried about other stand-up comedians stealing my material and they're not worried about me either."

The jokes about disabilities are the hardest ones to write, according to Leake, because he doesn't give his disability much thought. "I lead a rather full, happy life," he states. "When somebody asks me what happened to me, I tell them I broke a chain letter." When children ask about the unusual movement in his upper body caused by the muscular weakness, Leake tells them he's a transformer. When he gets tired of walking, he becomes a dune buggy.

The lack of accessibility of some stages and entertainment spots causes some difficulties for Leake and another comedian Chris "Crazy Legs" Fonseca, who has cerebral palsy (CP) and moves with a noticeable limp. His speech is also somewhat impaired, but that hasn't stopped Fonseca from working with Jerry Seinfeld, Paula Poundstone, and Arsenio Hall. "I didn't get into comedy to wave any sort of flag about what people with disabilities can do," he says. "But CP is a part of what makes me unique, so I do try to promote a positive image in my work."

Buckley also uses her comedy to create a positive image for people with disabilities. She does motiva-

tional speaking on behalf of the ADA. "I want people to know that I'm not made up of what I don't have, but what I am," she says. "It's important to challenge what you have and what you are, whether or not that includes a disability."

Leake says he gets angry when people look at him and think all people with disabilities can do what they want if they really try. He considers himself fortunate to make such a good living and have such a good life. At times people have assumed that he is exaggerating or distorting his actions and appearance intentionally to promote a stage act. "That is simply not funny, and I know funny."

Others have accused Fonseca of exploiting his disability. "I don't see my jokes as exploitation, but as a way of explaining a little bit about disabilities to those who don't know firsthand." This change in attitudes through comedy can be achieved. "You don't have to really be funny—you just have to develop your own style and

think about things in a different way," Leake says.

That's the only real challenge before Leake, Buckley, and the other comedians—to develop their unique style—to see things everyone else sees and make a joke out of it. And, for a few minutes each day, to simply make people laugh. ◊

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**Chris "Crazy Legs" Fonseca**

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