

Comedian brings her view to Trenton's Patriot Theater

By BETH E. FAND

October 8, 2004

Publication: Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Word Count: 1386

Joy Behar uses humor to benefit cancer-related charities.

Being politically correct has never been a priority for Joy Behar.

Ferreting out the humor in things has always been more important, whether on the set of the ABC television show "The View" or during her childhood at funerals in her Brooklyn neighborhood.

"People would act crazy in the funeral home and I did shtick about it or imitated Jerry Lewis," recalls Behar, who was known, back then, by her given name — Josephine Victoria Occhiuto.

"(In school), I would miss certain honor rolls because I talked too much. Even though I had good grades they'd keep me off because I carried on too much," adds the comedian, who ended her years at Manhattan's Washington Irving High School by writing, producing and emceeing a play she describes as a "sendup of the teachers." Still, there are some lines even Behar won't cross.

She refuses to poke fun at the patients in the mental hospital where she once worked, and she's just as serious about the cancer-related charities that often benefit from her on-stage act.

"I work with Gilda's Club a lot," says Behar, who's been a co-host of "The View" since the live daytime talk show went on the air seven years ago. "I don't have ovarian cancer in my family, thank God, but it struck down two funny women, Madeline Kahn and Gilda Radner, and the people involved in those organizations seem to have migrated toward me to do things."

Behar will make a similar contribution tomorrow when she takes the stage at the Patriots Theater in Trenton's War Memorial. As the headliner for the 12th annual Vincent Rugnetta Memorial Concert, Behar will help raise money for cancer research.

Her appearance will mark an anniversary, of a sort.

A dozen years ago, Behar entertained at the very first Rugnetta concert, opening for singer Vic Damone at a country club in Monmouth County, says event organizer Tony Rugnetta.

Since then, both the comedian and the fund-raising event have gained a level of clout they could have only dreamed of when they came together the first time around.

The fund-raiser _ started by Rugnetta of Monmouth County in honor of his father, who died of lung cancer at the age of 65 _ attracted 500 people and brought in \$5,000 in its inaugural year, Rugnetta says.

It continued to grow after moving to the Count Basie Theater, then in Red Bank, and attracted between 5,000 and 6,000 people last year when Chuck Berry and Little Richard entertained at Trenton's Sovereign Bank Arena. So far, the annual event has raised a total of nearly \$200,000.

Tomorrow, the show will make a new start when it has its War Memorial debut.

And this time, another comedian _ Angela LaGreca _ will be opening for Behar.

It only seems right, considering how far Behar's career has come since she last did the Rugnetta show.

The comedian has hosted an HBO special and a call-in show on WABC radio, provided the voice of a character on the animated "Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist" television show, appeared in films including Woody Allen's "Manhattan Murder Mystery," starred in off-Broadway show "The Food Chain," written an ongoing advice column for Good Housekeeping magazine and penned a book, "Joy Shtick: or What is the Existential Vacuum and Does it Come with Attachments?"

She could hardly have imagined some of those achievements when she took the stage 12 years ago in that Monmouth County country club.

At the time, she was a standup comedian struggling her way up a ladder she hadn't been climbing for long.

The stage was new to Behar because she'd spent most of her career in the classroom _ first earning a master's degree in English education from the State University of New York at Stony Brook and then teaching high school English.

"I really didn't think teaching was for me," she says. "It was really a lot of work, a lot of stress and difficult to do _ especially English, because you have homework all day _ and I had a kid, so it was too much.

"I really wanted to get into show business, but I didn't have the guts to do what I'm doing now. So I got a job as a receptionist at 'Good Morning America.' "

When Behar was fired from that job _ "a lot of times in TV, when the ratings are down, they fire the receptionist: They think that does something," she says _ she decided to

give comedy a try.

"I secretly wanted to do it for many years, but it's a scary thing to do," Behar says. "Finally, when I had nothing else to lose _ I had no job, I was divorced, I had no money _ I figured 'What the hell? Go for it.' "

For Behar _ who kept her ex-husband's last name because it was easier to pronounce _ the decision meant getting on stages in Greenwich Village and in "long, skinny, crazy rooms in the middle of Jersey somewhere" and seeing if she could make people laugh.

"It's like being a Christian being thrown to the lions in the coliseum," says Behar, adding that there were no comedy classes available at the time and no seasoned comedians willing to offer advice. "It's trial by fire, so you keep getting back up and up and up until you get good at it."

Behar must have accomplished that, because when she entertained at Milton Berle's 89th birthday party at Manhattan's Waldorf-Astoria hotel, she attracted some attention.

Newscaster Barbara Walters, who was sitting in the crowd that night, called her soon afterward and asked her to audition for "The View."

"Everybody else was laughing, but she wasn't," Behar recalls of Walters. "She was studying me, I think."

Behar went to the audition thinking Walters was "not ever going to hire me," she says, but when she got there, something "clicked."

A lot of women were trying out, but, as luck would have it, Behar ended up grouped with Meredith Vieira, Star Jones and Debbie Matenopoulos for the audition and, instantly, "there was chemistry," she says.

In fact, Behar says, the group was hired exactly as it was, without any cuts or additions, to launch the new show. And, with the exception of Matenopoulos, who has since been replaced, the famous morning coffee klatch is still intact.

" 'The View' is doing very well, so we're just in it, in the moment," Behar says.

The show shapes each weekday for Behar, who gets up at 8 a.m. _ or an hour and a half earlier, if she's going to the gym _ and reports to "The View's" Manhattan studio.

The co-hosts sit together while they have their hair and makeup done, using that time to choose and discuss the day's "hot topics" before going on the air, Behar says. Their days on the set often end with meetings or media interviews.

But for the co-stars, that schedule is often just a beginning.

"We all do other things," Behar says. "For some reason, my agent is booking me on a lot of (standup) jobs this year, and I'm starting to do a weekly radio show. You try to fit them in without killing yourself, because you have to strike while the iron is hot."

Those aspects of Behar's life are likely to come together a bit when she takes the stage in Trenton tomorrow. "The View," she says, is sure to be among the topics she'll incorporate into her act.

"One thing I like to do is talk about people who have been on the show, the celebrities," she says, "and hopefully the audience will even ask some questions."

The fund-raiser, which is being produced with the help of Rugnetta's cousins, Tom and Geri Mellon of Langhorne, Pa., will be opened by Rugnetta's sons. Tony Rugnetta Jr. will sing the event's theme song, "The Impossible Dream," with guitar accompaniment

by his brother, Vincent Rugnetta. Then Vincent's band will entertain until LaGreca, the comedian who warms up "The View's" audience every day, comes on.

Also during the evening, Rugnetta will present a man or woman of the year award and talk about new developments in cancer research.

"We should not shy away from talking about it," Rugnetta says. "We need to converge, because in unity there is strength. One day we will take what seems like an impossible dream and make it come true, and defeat this horrible foe."

"An Evening with Joy Behar" will be at the Patriots Theater at the War Memorial on Barrack Street, Trenton, tomorrow at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$40- \$75.
www.thewarmemorial.com or (609) 984-8400.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Date: October 8, 2004

Copyright, 2004, The Times, Trenton N.J. All Rights Reserved.