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Jane Condon is all smiles at home in Greenwich.

Mel Greer/Staff photo



She adds a little imagination and exaggeration as a stand-up comic.

Mel Greer/Staff photo

Seriously folks, she's a stand-up comic

By Christine Lyall
Special Correspondent

Among the regular comedians at Norwalk's Treehouse Cafe & Comedy Club, Jane Condon is affectionately known as "Mrs. Clean," and the club's owners like her because she leaves the bathroom cleaner than when she went in.

That's her style, which works for her on stage and off.

A Greenwich wife and mother of two, Condon moonlights as a stand-up comedian, and her attention to cleanliness is known in more ways than one.

Condon sat on a stool in her all-white kitchen, sipping a Diet Coke out of a wine glass and listening to a roast chicken sizzling in the oven. A neat row of cereal boxes along the top of the refrigerator, a box of animal crackers and an array of toys on the floor are evidence of her two sons, Mac, 5, and Todd, 8. They were away at piano lessons.

"I used to care about world peace, but now I just want a big red tomato," said Condon, 40, gazing out at her backyard.

Funny, honest and unassuming comments like these are typical of Condon in her everyday conversations and in her stand-up routines, which focus on her life in Greenwich.

Condon moved to town in 1986 after living in Japan for five years, where her husband, Ken Bartels, an investment banker, was transferred on business. She was raised in Brockton, Mass., and attended Wellesley College and Harvard University before she moved to New York City and worked as a reporter for *Fortune* and *Life* magazines for about 10 years. She was a correspondent for *People Weekly* while she lived in Tokyo.

While in Japan, Condon also wrote a book about Japanese women, "A Half-Step Behind, Japanese Women of the '80s," published in hardcover by Dodd Mead & Co. in 1985.

Since returning to the states, Condon has lectured on her studies of Japanese women and has put the finishing touches on the paperback version of her book, which is due out this fall. She has also appeared on "The Today Show" and the "Merv Griffin Show" to discuss her book.

Now she wants to put Japan behind her and concentrate — seriously — on comedy.

"When we came back from Japan, which is very serious, I was amazed to find how funny Americans really are," Condon said. "With AM radio and supermarkets, Americans have such an incredible sense of humor."

Condon traces her first experiences with making people laugh back to her early lectures on Japan.

"The interesting thing to me," she said, "was that on this serious topic, people would be laughing at parts of my presentation."

When the recession set in and started taking its emotional toll on Americans, Condon stopped and asked herself, What



Condon, who bases her routine on life in Greenwich, performs for guests at the Treehouse Cafe & Comedy Club in Norwalk.

Gregg Matthews/For Greenwich Time



does this country need most? Someone who knows about Japan or someone who can make people laugh and relieve the pain?

She opted for a little joking around. "My husband calls it delayed adolescence," Condon said, laughing. "But I call it early midlife crisis."

All kidding aside, her husband and family support her choice to be a comedian and are often the source of her best material, she said.

Stand-up comedy is something Condon had wanted to do since she lived around the corner from the Comic Strip, a club in New York City. As she passed by on her way home from work, the club would continually lure her to take a crack at the crowd on one of the open-microphone nights.

"I thought, 'Oh, that'd be great to do,' but I was a reporter for *Fortune* and I had a responsible job. I had to get up in the morning . . . I couldn't stay out all night," she said.

About two years ago, she finally decided to take a class in stand-up comedy at the New School in New York. For her final assignment, she had to perform live in front of an audience, so she took to the stage on open-mike night at the Comic Strip.

"Unfortunately, I did very well," Condon said. "Once you hear the applause, it's hard to go back. It's a great feeling."

Years of practice as a writer helped Condon prepare for a career, in which her success depends largely on clever observation. But going on stage and delivering her material is another thing altogether.

"I've always been a semi-ham," she said. She thinks this trait may have been acquired from her father, an FBI agent who would often come down to breakfast in his boxer shorts — wearing one of her mother's pillbox hats and mink stoles.

Condon admitted that she needs to refine her delivery and loosen up a little more, but she also has to be true to herself. And there are certain things she refuses to do.

Condon used to have one joke with a swearword in it, but she threw it out because she was uncomfortable telling it. The squeaky-clean comedian even crinkles her nose and shudders a little when she says the word "gig."

Condon said she often gets surprise reactions from people who first meet her and find out that she's a comedian. Nothing really sets her apart unless you look beyond the perky haircut, youthful face and fuzzy-knit sweaters.

One time a heckler yelled out to Condon that she looked like his third-grade math teacher. She answered: "I guess I do!"

It's much harder to work clean in comedy, but if she wants to go on television, she must, Condon said. For now, she prefers to use her family and her daily Greenwich experiences as material, and she sees younger audiences as a challenge to her style of humor.

"With comedy," she said, "I'm the producer, the director, the writer and the performer. And if it works, then I did

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In today's limousine business, less may be the way to go

By William S. Bergstrom
Associated Press

PORT SANILAC, Mich. — The gross national product shrank. Unemployment grew. Now limousine makers are getting stretched.

Not only had the recession and the Persian Gulf crisis combined to squeeze corporate profits and workers' paychecks, but the companies that make limos aren't making quite so many these days.

Limousine converters are those companies that saw regular cars in half and add extra seats, a television, telephone, bar and the other niceties you find inside. In the mid-1980s, converters sold about 4,000 stretch limousines a year, said Wayne Smith, a spokesman for the Washington-based National Limousine Association.

But with the recession, makers are expected to sell only 1,200 to 1,500 this year, Smith said. Meanwhile, the number of converters has shrunk from about 50 two

years ago to nearly a dozen today because of the tough economic times and a crack-down on safety standards, he said.

Some of the bigger limousine converters are National Coach Engineering Ltd. of Port Sanilac, Mich., Kristo Coach of Anaheim, Calif., and DeBryan Coach of Springfield, Mo.

Their vehicles are sold to the 2,000 full-time and 5,000 part-time limousine rental companies that operate in the United States.

Rental companies encountered a rough ride starting last year. When economic times got tough, many traditional limo riders sought more modest means of transportation.

The drop in air travel during the Persian Gulf War also cut down on the use of limousines to and from airports, especially international hubs.

The limo business is poised to pick up now that the war. The limousine associa-

tion estimates limos are used in 70 percent of all weddings.

Improvement may not be so imminent for converters. Even before the recession, they were battling a survival-of-the-fittest shakeout that closed dozens of smaller shops that couldn't afford to meet federal safety standards.

"We intend to be one of the ones that's left when it's all over with," said Garret W. Forbis, president of National Coach, which has built limos for celebrities like former heavyweight champion Buster Douglas, singer Robert Goulet and the late Sammy Davis Jr. National Coach cars also have appeared on the *Miami Vice* and *Columbo* TV series.

Forbis' company has operated since 1971, keeping more long, sleek cars gliding through Port Sanilac than usual for a village of 650 people about 85 miles north of Detroit.

With the economic slack, Forbis has

stopped making cars at his 70,000-square-foot Port Sanilac building, using it for storage and heating only a few offices.

But 45 workers at his Forester plant turn out one limousine a day, about the same as at the other big companies.

"We're part of the whole community up here, so we've decided to tighten our belts and suffer through this," Forbis said.

He led the way past workers adding frames to cut-in-half Cadillacs and lengthening Lincolns with welded-in panels. Automakers such as Ford Motor Co. and General Motors Corp. provide the base cars, which have beefed-up frames, brakes, and electrical systems to start with.

Over the racket of electric saws and the clang of tools he pointed out workers grinding down seams, smoothing surfaces and applying paint. Others were installing leather, carpeting and hardwood-trimmed interiors.

Some of the cushy cabins were muted

and purposeful, filled with TV, phone and fax gear for vital communications.

Limousines for executives and government officials who use such gear make up 80 percent of the market, Forbis said.

A typical executive limousine might be stretched by 40 inches, extending the length of a standard 18½-foot Lincoln Town Car to just under 22 feet.

"You don't notice them as much as the big white ones," Forbis said, referring to the flashier cars built for rental companies. Those cars are stretched as much as eight feet and decorated with gleaming white leather, cut-glass decanters and ice tubs for champagne.

Video cassette and compact disc players soothe or rouse the senses in those rolling palaces. The glamor crowd can also order chandeliers or red carpets that drop from the doorsill to the sidewalk on arrival.

"Limousines have that mystique about

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