

Health, Humor and Hospitals

BY HOB OSTERLUND

"Chuckle Channel" offers entertainment to patients



"Yes, may I help you?" The nurse leans toward the intercom, listening to one of the countless call lights she's answered that evening.

"Your supper tray is still here and you would like me to feed you?" She repeats what she's heard, rolling her eyes just a little.

It's nearly midnight, her evening shift tasks are far from over, and she's tired. So tired, she says, that the bags under her eyes are too big to qualify for carry-on luggage.

"Well, what are your arms, broken or what?"

Out of our earshot, the patient affirms that his arms are indeed incapacitated.

"Oh. For real?" She nods, and mentally adds the supper tray to her endless list of things to do.

Ivy Push, RN has been a staff nurse for more than 40 years. She's seen it all, has taken care of senators and felons, ice addicts and movie stars, the mentally lost and the nearly enlightened. Like most nurses, she somehow manages to keep some patience for

her patients. Her compassion may be tired, but it's still alive.

"Now I get this one patient tonight, Mrs Macadangang. She so cute, and friendly too. Very congenital."

Ivy Push would like to retire, but her pension won't cover her bills.

"In fact, it don't even cover my tracks." So she keeps coming back to her evening shift at Waikiki General Hospital. Even though she rarely gets out on time, and sometimes has to work mandatory overtime, she decides against applying for a day shift, Monday-Friday job assisting with colonoscopies downstairs.

"You know why? I like spend more time in front of the patient than behind him."

Sitting up a little taller, Ivy says, "Folks in Hawaii always like tell what we made of, yeah?" She lists her English-Irish-Scottish-Hawaiian-Chinese-Portuguese extraction.

"This is good blood, but you know what I wish I was? I wish I was part time."

THE SHOW

Ivy Push, RN is my alter-ego. The new show *When Ivy Push Comes to Shove* was recently filmed before a full and enthusiastic house at the Manoa Valley Theatre in Honolulu.

In the script, Ivy retreats to a utility room for a few minutes of solitude and the only place to sit is an old broken commode. It's from this throne that she delivers her comedic wisdom, malaprops and general observations about the absurdity of our modern health care system.

When *Ivy Push Comes to Shove* is the second professional film with the Ivy character. *Ivy Push Live* in Honolulu was filmed in 1998, and was very well-received locally as well as nationally. This summer the show makes its international debut at the Society for the Arts in Healthcare annual conference in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

People sometimes ask how well local-style conversation travels outside of Hawaii, but you can't take the pidgin out of Ivy. You didn't have to know Puerto Rican culture to understand Rosanne Roseannadana, Gilda Radner's infamous *Saturday Night Live* character. Ivy grew up on Kauai, and has to be authentic. The show doesn't work otherwise.

The new film is underwritten by a grant from the Lloyd Symington Foundation, which supports visionary cancer care. Under the terms of the grant, we will give away 200 DVDs to people with a cancer diagnosis. In order to get a sense of the impact of the 47-minute comedy, we will ask some individuals to complete a very simple tool that measures specific symptoms such as pain, nausea and overall well-being, to be completed before and after watching the DVD.

We already know humor is healthy. Real humor: the kind that uplifts and unites, not the kind that insults and demoralizes.

HEALTHY EVIDENCE

Plenty of scientific studies already support the concept of laughter as the best medicine. In March of this year, the University of Maryland Medical Center released data from a study in which participants were divided into two groups. One group watched a scene from the war movie *Saving Private Ryan* and the other watched a clip from the comedy *Kingpin*.

The light-hearted movie consistently relaxed the blood vessels of the volunteers, increasing blood flow to the heart in a way similar to the blood flow after aerobic exercise. Michael Miller, the director of UMMC's preventive cardiology, concluded that laughter can lead to a healthier heart.

Stressful movie scenes, however, were not just neutral. They actually decreased blood flow to the heart. This kind of

stress could ultimately have a negative effect on cardiac health, Dr. Miller speculates. Laughter actually protects the heart.

This fact is significant in a country where heart disease is the number one killer. Dr. Miller suggests that hearty laughter should be added to the list of prevention factors such as exercising, avoiding smoking and eating foods low in saturated fat.

Other studies have proven that humor reduces the level of stress hormones in the body, enhances the immune system and gently increases the heart rate.

Laughter can also increase tolerance to pain. This is of special interest to me, since I work as a clinical nurse specialist in Pain and Palliative Care (PPC) at The Queen's Medical Center. It helps that every last one of us in PPC at Queen's is a ridiculous person, because we get an experience of humor's uplifting qualities everyday. We just feed off each other's absurdities and then watch the silliness take its own wild ride.

It's never about putting someone down. In fact, we've declared our office a gossip-free zone. If the humor is racial in focus, it's done Hawaii-style. We can tease about hairy Okinawans, cheap Chinese and Filipino food because there is Okinawan, Chinese and Filipino blood in the veins of the ones participating in the laughter.

To spread the good will that laughter brings, the PPC staff creates an annual

calendar that's primarily meant to entertain. Our first calendar, the "Miss Sweet Potato Court," was so popular that we had to go into a second printing. Ditto for their 2004 "Supah Titas of Pain," which remains on walls of nursing units and doctors' offices. It may have outlived its usefulness as a calendar, but not as a joke.

I've been taking this humor business seriously for more than 25 years. When I worked at Wilcox Memorial Hospital



I wrote one of nursing's first articles about the concept of humor and health for *Nursing 82*. My comedy column *Peak and Trough* won first place in a non-fiction writing contest, and I presented *What's So Funny About Cancer Care* for the Oncology Nursing Society's annual conference in 1980.

Mine is a family that prizes wit and nonsense. Every day my dad literally laughed until he cried, often about some obscure notion. It was contagious stuff. My cousin Martha Beckwith, author of *Hawaiian Mythology*, was known as a deeply serious scholar, but she used to put her reading glasses on top of her head and feign irritation toward her nervous students, accusing them of stealing her specs. ♦

Hob Osterlund lives on Kauai and is a nurse, a freelance writer and a comedian. Her last article for *Inspiration* "A Royal View" featured her interview with the Queen of Bhutan.

Chuckle Channel at Queen's

Like many medical centers, Queen's has an in-house television station available for patients and staff. In order to provide easy access to humor, it recently launched a "Chuckle Channel." In conjunction with Andy Bumatai and KGMB9 television, *All in the 'Ohana and High School Daze* has joined *When Ivy Push Comes to Shove* on continuous programming. So has *Rap's Hawai'i*. Queen's is looking for more performers to give permission add their clean comedies to the list. Got one? Call 808-547-4726.

Stars Discovering Ivy Push

Ivy Push, RN has captured the attention of stars such as *Bea Arthur* of *Golden Girls*, who says, "Forget *Florence Nightingale*. *Ivy Push* heals patients with huge doses of the quintessential pain killer --- laughter."

Only this year *Ivy* was discovered by *Dana Carvey* of *Saturday Night Live* and *Wayne's World* fame. "This is very funny stuff," he chuckles.

How did *Dana* stumble upon *Ivy*? I have a beautiful, muscular niece who happens to be *Dana's* massage therapist. While she was digging with her elbow into a painful knot in his back, she whispered into his ear, "Watch my auntie's show."

DVD

When *Ivy Push Comes to Shove* is now for sale. If you'd like to give one free to someone with a cancer diagnosis, or to an institution that does cancer care and is interested in showing the DVD to patients, give us the details by going to www.ivypush.com and click on "contact." You may also call 808-826-6286.

Get the new DVD!
When *Ivy Push Comes to Shove*
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