

Popular comedian comes home to share laughs

BY BARB PERT TEMPLETON
VOICE REPORTER

Hayrides at Blake's Apple Orchard in Armada and a family that supported her love of the stage. Those are two of the best memories Detroit area native Donna East has about growing up in Michigan before heading to New York to pursue an acting career.

Today, East is a sought after stand-up comic who has opened



Donna East

for John Tesh, entertained the troops in seven countries around the world and appeared on

Bananas TV on a show that aired in 110 million homes worldwide.

Dubbed New York City's "Queen of Clean," East, will return home Feb. 4 to perform in a fund-raiser for an Anchor Bay High School Scholarship. The evening of comedy will begin at 7:30 p.m. at Anchor Bay High School Performing Arts Center, at 6319 County Line Road in

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Fair Haven. Tickets are \$15 for adults and \$10 for seniors and students.

Currently married and living in New York City, East is expecting her first baby in May. She's pleased to be coming to town and said her own grandmother is a resident of New Baltimore.

"My grandmother is well known in New Baltimore, Kathleen Rivard Howe," East said. "She worked at the local post office for 35 years."

The Voice recently caught up with East to ask a few questions

about her Michigan roots and road to the comedy circuit.

Voice: You're originally from Michigan, where did you grow up and what school (high school) did you attend?

East: "I grew up in Sterling Heights and I attended Stevenson High School."

V: Were you involved with theater in high school or college?

East: "Yes, my junior and senior year I was in Stage Door; Annie; Our Town and You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown. I also attended Michigan State University where I minored in theater and performed in numerous plays and musicals (even though I can't sing). Well, maybe it was only one musical

now that I think about it. After college I worked for a while at WMUZ 103.5 FM "The Light" in Detroit to save money in order to move to NYC to pursue an acting career."

Q: Did you start your career at comedy clubs in Michigan?

East: "No, I started in New York City. I was waiting on tables and my coworkers were always telling me, 'You are so funny. You should try stand-up.' I was scared to be alone on stage. What if I'm not funny? I can't blame it on the script or other actors. So I took a class. My first shot at it was in Times Square at a famous comedy club called Caroline's. I was a hit. Then I found myself performing and honing my act in the circles there."

Q: What did your parents think about your career choice?

East: "They did not want me to major in theater so I majored in journalism. A good writing background is always useful, especially now, when I'm writing my own material. They are good Christian people so they love it when they hear I performed in a church. My grandmother said, 'But I don't want you making fun of Jesus.' I said, 'Grandma, I'm not gonna make fun of Jesus. I'm gonna make fun of YOU!'"

Q: What was your first "gig" that came with a paycheck?

East: "I can't remember, but I think it was at a bookstore in New York City and they passed the hat. Seems to me there may have been a hole in the hat."

Q: Did you strive to fit into a "clean comedy" routine or did it just happen naturally?

East: "It's a long story...I didn't start clean. Everybody was swearing and telling bathroom jokes so I thought that's what I should do. Sure, I got laughs, but I didn't really feel comfortable in my skin. I guess you could say I was convicted by my act. I certainly would not have my grandma watching my act back then. I didn't think I could be funny unless I used foul language so I quit. A few years later, God (not audibly but through a series of real events)

told me to get back up and start doing comedy for him. This was right before 9/11 and I was working across the street from the World Trade Center. If I had not been obedient to the call on my life to make people laugh, then I would have been in the tower at ten minutes till nine when the first plane hit getting my cup of coffee like I did every morning. That really put things in perspective for me. I believe we all have a call on our life if we are paying attention."

Q: What or who is the biggest source of your comedy material?

East: "My life. Perhaps that's why people stay away...they don't want to end up in my act."

Q: You do several characters on stage...have a personal favorite? Why?

East: "Asian pedicurist...because it's true to this day. She doesn't seem to out date herself. Next week I'm going to the salon and I can guarantee it will be the same scenario. About a month ago I got kicked out of a salon. The sign said \$20 and she charged me \$21. I just wanted to know why? It's not like I had a French pedicure. Apparently, she didn't like that. I'm not even sure why they call them French. I've never even met a French person with a pedicure. I think they're afraid

of the footbath."

Q: What was it like to travel around the world to perform for the troops? Favorite or most memorable stop on the tour?

East: "Oh my...that's a hard one. Iceland was really interesting. I think I remember most all the 'Thank you's.' They so badly wanted a taste of home. I thought why are you thanking me? It's an honor. Besides, I'm getting paid."

Q: When did you branch out beyond the clubs to corporate and private events?

East: "When I realized I could make more money. And it's nice to be in healthier environments."

Q: What do you enjoy best about going before a live audience?

East: "The improv of it all. Every audience has a different personality and I never know what I'm gonna get."

Q: What advice would you give a new high school graduate looking to a career in stand-up comedy?

East: "Be committed. Write everyday. Perform everywhere you can. Don't be afraid. Slip new jokes into your circle of friends and see how they react. It takes years to build an act."