



Barbara Kaufman-Levy: Finding Her Audience

By Carrie Smoot

Participants in a local mother-daughter workshop weren't expecting to laugh. Imagine their surprise when Barbara Kaufman-Levy, a Gaithersburg, MD, Jungian psychologist leading the seminar, entered—dressed as an old Jewish mother teaching her daughter how to make gefilte fish. The character Kaufman-Levy created is very loving, but simultaneously critical and judgmental. The audience loved it.

"The relationship between mother and daughter is passionate and complex, offering both women growth possibilities... [Shared] gender makes for a certain 'oneness,' where emotional separation becomes key. Materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement," Kaufman-Levy says.

She combines her mid-life, stand-up routine with a presentation on its major psychological challenges.

"I suggested [to Barbara] that she put them into [our] workshops," says colleague and friend Julie Bondanza, a psychologist with offices in Takoma Park, MD, and Greenwich Village, NY. "The mother she played was so guilt-inducing and yet so there for her kids that no one could turn her away," Bondanza says. "The [provocative] routine opened discussion. Humor interferes with the normal way of looking at things, turning them upside down."

Kaufman-Levy's unique style wins people over during the mid-life routine. "It's a little shocking," Bondanza says. "The punch lines catch you off guard, then you start chuckling."



Barbara Kaufman-Levy

Friends enjoyed longer versions of the mother skits at synagogue retreats and charity events. She performed a send-up of Mike Myers' Linda Richman character from "Saturday Night Live" in gray wig, pillbox hat, old earrings, dowdy dress, nylons to the knees and ugly shoes. She carried a green leather bag.

"Somehow [Barbara's] being a therapist and her enjoyment of being onstage fit together," her friend Anne Mazonson says. "She's sparkling, warm and broad-minded. Barbara was hilarious

as a stereotypical Jewish mother—very controlling, but warm, affectionate and supportive, especially proud of her children's accomplishments. Normally I despise ethnic humor, but if you're inside the group, you understand and it's OK." Mazonson, a Bethesda psychiatrist, says humor relieves anxiety, getting people out of stuck places in their heads, enabling them to laugh at themselves and their foibles.

Kaufman-Levy never planned to become a

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- When you are a middle-aged woman, seen as having lost your youthful beauty, no one pays attention to you. It's like being invisible; it's a perfect time for a mid-life career change to shoplifting or auto theft.

- There's a wonderful part of growing older—the wisdom you

gain. Now I know: life is a journey. Life isn't one thing after another, but the same thing, over, and over, again.

- Mid-life is a time of great loss: loss of people, loss of memory. My friend's mother died. I called her and said: "Doris, I'm so sorry to hear about the death of your mother." She said, "It wasn't my

mother; it was my father." I said, "Are you sure?"

- I would have been happier if I lived during the Renaissance—when women were revered for their potbellies.

- My son is turning 13. Here he is becoming a man, and I still haven't lost my pregnancy weight.

- Some say when you get older, there's more loneliness and no sense of community. I don't feel this way. In my car in the morning, I see people in the next car flossing their teeth, putting on makeup, navigating their noses. It's like we're all in the shower together.

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comedian. As she worked with other psychologists on case studies and discovered similar tastes in humor from day-to-day joking around, she tried writing her observations. She carries a small notebook to jot down ideas. Her profession hasn't escaped her wit, either. In 1999, she appeared twice on WJFK radio's "For Love or Money" program as another original character, British psychologist Josephine Lovelock. "That was fun. I didn't have to dress up!"

Jungian psychology, emphasizing archetypes, dreams, myths and everyday opposites, fits her comedy about womanhood, parenting and midlife. Kaufman-Levy wrote humor frequently during her father's illness and eventual death. "It was a way through to the other side of the sadness," she says, remembering words from Roseanne Barr: 'You can't refute comedy. It's a physical response in the body and the mind. It comes and it snatches you up and it makes you dance.' I love that. It really describes the response to good comedy."

Kaufman-Levy says the central question of mid-life is, "Why am I not who I am?" Some people feel banged over the head by growing

older, [sometimes resulting] in anxiety, depression and illness. Humor helps you transform to a different attitude. It can enable you to experience something troubling from an alternate perspective, [helping] to balance and work through difficult emotions."

Kaufman-Levy visited the Im-

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prov and other comedy clubs. "They catered to young [people] in their 20s. The material got pretty raunchy. Most people would find my routine funny, but not everyone would... relate to it. You have to find your own audience," she says, looking toward women's groups, professional conferences, luncheons, dinners and mid-life birthday parties.

She likes the comedy of Mel Brooks, Wanda Sykes, Billy Crystal,

Chris Rock and others. "I don't like swear words," Kaufman-Levy says, "but if you focus on what comedians are saying, you'll find they have interesting ways of looking at the world."

Her husband and sons, 16 and 12, are her practice audience. "It's a lot different on stage being myself, hoping people will like my work," she says. "People tell the truth by spontaneous reactions."

Kaufman-Levy enjoys collecting shells and rocks of different shapes, textures and colors. She decorated a mirror with some. Pleased, she designed more, selling a few at a Silver Spring art show and earning a commission. Comedy, writing and art reflect Kaufman-Levy's mid-life journey in process, reconnecting her with "creative fire" and capturing the "spirit of the child."

"Laughter is life enhancing and rejuvenating," she says.

To request Barbara Kaufman-Levy for your event, call 301-309-9362 or email bklevy17@msn.com

Carrie Smoot is a Northern Virginia freelance writer.

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ple's relationship to it, and the ways different cultures look at life and death." The space itself is very dark, covered by black felt curtains. Light comes from fluorescent handrails. The viewer looks down a hole into a monitor, and the monitor displays a visual representation of the seismic activity. Some people—and dogs—like to lie on the floor while experiencing Mori.

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Carrie Smoot is a Northern Virginia freelance writer.

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