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A close-up portrait of a woman with dark, wavy hair, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a blue top. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with a stone wall and some foliage.

**LAUGHING
MATTERS**

DHAYA LAKSHMINARAYANAN, ZETA MU/MIT, EXPLORES THE PHYSICS OF COMEDY.



FUNNY BUSINESS

DISTINGUISHED BY TWO DEGREES FROM MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, DHAYA LAKSHMINARAYAN TAKES TO THE STAGE AND LEAVES THEM LAUGHING AS A SMART, SAVVY, SUCCESSFUL—AND SOMEWHAT UNEXPECTED—STAND-UP COMIC.

BY JAN SCHMITZ MATHEW, Δ/ILLINOIS

From the tender age of five, Dhaya Lakshminarayanan had a knack for getting good laughs.

She recalls, as a kindergarten teacher, asking her classmate, Matt, which color he loved best. When he answered “blue,” young Dhaya quipped, “If you love it so much, why don’t you marry it?”

Matt laughed; the teacher didn’t. Dhaya landed in time-out, where she put the exclusion to good use. “When my teacher asked me if I had thought about what I said, I replied, ‘Not really—but I did think of a few more jokes!’” she says, laughing.

Dhaya, Zeta Mu/MIT, holds fond memories of growing up in a family where laughter was always the best medicine and humor was valued. Her parents, who were born in India, came to Chicago in the early 1970s and eventually settled in Birmingham, Ala., with Dhaya and her brother, Venkat.

“The image of the traditional Indian household is studious and serious, but we didn’t fit that stereotype,” says Dhaya, known as the family prankster. “My mom was gregarious, boisterous, and made fun of everyone and everything—herself, her age, her husband.

“People always said, ‘Dhaya’s mom is funny, and her dad *thinks* he’s funny!’”

A self-described “slow learner,” Dhaya also was a lukewarm reader—with the exception of joke books, which she devoured. Her constant companion was a construction paper notebook, its pages packed with jokes she considered “money.”

“One of my favorites was, ‘What’s worse than biting into an apple and seeing a worm? Biting in and seeing half a worm!’” she recalls. “My mom always encouraged me to be myself and, for me, that meant amusing my classmates by telling jokes.”

Through the years, the laughs kept coming. But as Dhaya blossomed from a funny girl into a smart, sophisticated, and witty woman, she also uncovered the key to comedy as an art form: The best material comes from what you know.

“Nobody else can make jokes about being an Indian girl growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, and going to MIT,” says Dhaya, who is now based in San Francisco. “The more you can be yourself, off- and on-stage, the better you are as an artist.

“My comedy routines focus on what I’m feeling, and what’s important to me.”

And, in venues from Atlanta to Chicago and New York to Canada, Dhaya’s comedic creed—like her long-ago construction paper notebook—is “money.”

LEFT BRAIN MEETS RIGHT BRAIN

A natural comedian, Dhaya also excelled at math and science and enjoyed problem solving—an affinity she shared with her father, A.V., a retired physicist and professor. Her parents encouraged her to apply to MIT and, true to form, Dhaya opted to select her own topic for the admissions essay.

“What I wrote was irreverent, sassy, and funny,”

she recalls. “I felt good about being accepted there, because I had been 100 percent myself.”

Dhaya earned both her bachelor of science degree and master of city planning degree from MIT, with her master’s work combining civil engineering, management, urban studies, and economics. And although MIT didn’t offer degrees in comedy, Dhaya also found ways to further hone her humor, most notably through Charm School.

An MIT tradition since 1993, Charm School plays off the stereotype of MIT students as awkward geeks in need of social graces. It runs for an awkward hour afternoons during MIT’s Independent Activities period—a four-week term in January/February that includes hundreds of academic, quasi-academic, and non-academic subjects—and each class spans only 15 minutes. Past Charm School curricula have included How to Shake Hands; Starting a Conversation; and How to Exude Confidence.

Through the years, Charm School has grown into a full-fledged community event, with MIT students, staff, and faculty teaming up to fuel its popularity and success. So it was only a matter of time before the name Dhaya Lakshminarayanan surfaced as a student guaranteed to combine Charm with a few good laughs.

Dhaya teamed up with Theta sister Stephanie Spavero to present Charm School lessons on Body Language, How to Tell a Joke, and The Art of Small Talk. She recalls this forum as her first opportunity to exercise public-speaking skills and to make the learning process fun for her audience. “A young woman who took ‘Small Talk’ told us that she actually got a date—thanks to our class!” says Dhaya, who taught Charm School classes as both an undergraduate and graduate student.

Following graduation, Dhaya worked as a management consultant with Booz Allen Hamilton, and in asset management for Parmassus Investments, a multi-billion-dollar socially responsible mutual fund, where she specialized in health services. She also was an investor in both venture capital and nonprofit projects for a \$400 million fund headed by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar. Dhaya next was named director of strategy and prizes at the Freedom Prize Foundation, which aims to decrease US dependence on foreign oil.

Within this professional realm—typically male-dominated and often characterized by competitiveness and stress—Dhaya found humor to be the great equalizer. “I’m five feet tall and weigh about 98 pounds,” she says. “So I didn’t feel I could walk into a boardroom and start talking to the guys about last week’s football game. Instead, the equalizing force was to make someone laugh. If I was simply being myself, I didn’t worry so much about being in the boys’ club.”

“I played by my own rules—and comedy was a way for me to fit in.”

Through the years, colleagues recognized Dhaya’s talent and encouraged her to pursue a career in stand-up comedy. She took the leap in 2006, performing in clubs and large theaters, and touring with Five Funny Females.

* Dhaya explains her last name: “Lakshminarayanan is spelled phonetically. When my dad came to the US, he was forced to take a name that was spelled in Tamil characters and make it into an English spelling. If you say each and every letter in my last name, do not omit, and do not add any letters, you will pronounce it 100 percent right. The problem is, people want to add an extra ‘r’ or an extra ‘e’ sound where there is none. So: Lakshmi-NA-ra-ya-nan.”

“My comedy routines focus on what I’m feeling, and what’s important to me.”

Want more?
For a schedule of Dhaya Lakshminarayanan’s upcoming performances, visit her website:
www.dhaya.comedy.com



"I was afraid," she admits, "but I also knew it would be impossible to pursue this without fear." She put together an eight-minute routine for her first gig, in which she appeared along with several performers.

"I was sick the entire week before but, when the time came, I took a heroic dose of cold medicine and, although I collapsed afterwards, I managed to do well for eight minutes," she recalls.

"The experience led to an aha moment. I learned that comedy is fun but, to be successful, you have to make it a priority. No matter what, you have to do your job. For me, that's to entertain people and to show them that comedy can elevate and educate."

LIVE AND ON STAGE ...

When creating her routines, Dhaya's best material comes from everyday interactions with friends and family, as well as from her environment and areas of interest. The range, she says, can stretch from public transportation and politics to the San Francisco Giants and Ben & Jerry's ice cream.

"Being observant and coming up with a weird take on things is an ongoing process," says Dhaya, who is now represented by JE Talent of San Francisco. "When I get an audience to laugh about things I'm interested in, I believe it elevates the art."

Dhaya further distinguishes her comedy as "clean." Although she occasionally tweaks her routine to fit the audience—such as more liberal and political jokes for a Berkeley venue—she doesn't swear or include graphic topics. She performs primarily at comedy clubs and private or corporate events, depending on whether she's the opener, feature, or headliner, her routines range from 10 to 45 minutes.

Business savvy is key to success, too, in terms of how to market and differentiate herself, and how to negotiate fees. "My worst experience was a routine I did at a bar on St. Patrick's Day," she recalls. "Most of the audience was drunk, and they weren't there to be elevated or to listen to comedy."

"If people haven't paid, they're not vested in my show, which means I'm not growing as a performer either."

Clean also describes the tone of Dhaya's comedy. "If you point out something that is unique or interesting or weird, the audience reacts to you saying something true, versus something that is negative or mean-

spirited. It never works to come across as if you're attacking anyone."

"NERD COMEDY" HITS THE NETWORKS

In January 2010, Dhaya was hired to host the pilot season of *High School Quiz Show*, a public television program created at WGBH in Boston. In an interview with BuzzerBlog head writer and editor Alex Davis prior to the show's March 2010 debut, Dhaya said: "As a former smart kid, I have a lot of nerd-pride. I love that this show celebrates brainy students. There's already a lot of emphasis on the competitive nature of sports; now smart kids will have their moment."

Not only did smart students shine in their moment, but the show, which won a New England Emmy, also illuminated another aha moment for Dhaya: The desire to create and eventually launch her own show.

"Stand-up is like a basic, fundamental science, or the physics of entertainment," she says. "It's a simple formula: you, the microphone, and the audience. You write, produce, act, and create."

"I still love business consulting, and the chance to get in front of people and solve problems. I realized I could combine (comedy and consulting) by producing a humorous show that teaches people something."

This fall, Dhaya teamed with One Economy, a San Francisco non-profit focused on bettering the lives of low-income households through inspirational media and the use of technology, to create a series entitled *Everyday Tech*. The pilot premiered in October 2011 on the Public Internet Channel.

"The series addresses how we can use simple technology to make our lives better without the extremely not-funny instruction manuals that are the norm on the web," explains Dhaya, who hosts the humorous videos. "The goal is that audiences will learn something while they are also busy laughing."

Within the next year, Dhaya also plans to introduce a routine of similar ilk, *Nerd Nation*, which she describes as a work in progress.

"Using myself as an example, this show will bring to light what it means to be a nerd, and why America needs nerds—particularly in economics and politics," she says. Dhaya envisions that *Nerd Nation* will roll out in several phases: first, a one-hour solo show, which she is already introducing as small segments in

Dhaya was the first host of *High School Quiz Show*, now in its third season on Boston's WGBH.



BEAUTY, BRAINS & COMEDY.

"Ten years from now, I hope that I've written my book and that I'm hosting a television show where I humorously teach people about technology, science, and math."



I USE MY WHOLE NAME WHEN I PERFORM, AND AFTER SHOWS I GET ASKED THE NUMBER-ONE DUMBEST QUESTION EVER: "IS LAKSHMINARAYANAN YOUR STAGE NAME?"

her stand-up routines; followed by filming for either PBS or the Discovery Channel; and, eventually, a book. The message linking all formats, Dhaya adds, is that learning—aka, "brainy stuff"—can be fun and funny.

"My goal is to debut a full solo show of Nerd Nation in front of a live audience within the next year," she says. In addition to personal reflections and recollections, Dhaya's research for the show includes interviews with fellow nerds. She's also committed to accepting speaking engagements that target girls who are interested in math and science.

Although originality is her hallmark, Dhaya can point to a cadre of comedians who have inspired her through the years: Carol Burnett, Lucille Ball, Tim Conway, Harvey Korman, Bill Cosby, and Jerry Seinfeld.

But the two topping her list—and who still get the biggest laughs—are her brother Venkat, who currently is completing his Ph.D. at Yale, and her mother, Ilena, a software engineer. As her earliest audience, they also planted the seeds of what Dhaya will always consider her roots.

"Ten years from now, I hope that I've written my book and that I'm hosting a television show where I humorously teach people about technology, science, and math. But even then, I'd like to spend some portion of every week with my notebook of jokes, getting on stage and trying out my material.

"I'll always want to do bare-bones comedy." ☺

CROWD-PLEASERS

Dhaya's stand-up comedy acts prove that true life is funnier than fiction.

LAST NAME

(Continued from left) In what kind of world would "Lakshminarayanan" be the easy version? Sixteen letters, six syllables. My father's whole name is Arasanipalaivenkatachari Lakshminarayanan. Maybe that's why he goes by his stage name. "Dad."

GOING TO SCHOOL AT MIT

At MIT, people said, "Wow—that ratio must have been so good for you, all those guys and you?" Not really. Maybe I didn't have to compete against women for the one or two or 3.14159 cute guys, but my competition was R2D2 action figures and *Battlestar Galactica* reruns.

Wear Your Letters on Your Heart

International Badge Day • Monday, March 5, 2012

This celebration to honor sisterhood was started in 1997 by the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC). The date is generally recognized during March, which is also National Women's History Month and set aside for International Women's Day.

Participating in International Badge Day is easy, whether you're an alumna or a collegian. It's as simple as wearing your pin or your Fraternity letters with pride.



international badge day