



LIFESTYLE

Dhaya Lakshminarayanan

FUNNY GIRL

FEARLESS. FUNNY. Desi. That may seem an unusual way to describe an Indian-American woman, but Dhaya Lakshminarayanan is hardly typical. Sure, she has bachelor's and master's degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and she's worked as a management consultant and venture capitalist, but what sets her apart is her vocation – stand-up comedy.

“Our community sometimes is risk-averse. So when we meet folks like me who are trying something different, people are amazed,” Lakshminarayanan says. “Every time I go on stage, I might fail. The audience might not be my crowd. New jokes might not work.”

Being able to take risks is part of the equation -- whether you want to be a venture capitalist or a comedian. “Being excited to take risks and perhaps fail and fail big in a sense is what has helped me become more and more successful every year,” Lakshminarayanan says.

For her, getting laughs is almost personal. When she was in kindergarten, she made a joke journal out of construction paper. In high school, when she placed nationally in a social studies program, she presented a one-woman show while others created posters. “I always knew I was funny and sarcastic because I saw the reaction I caused in others,” she says.

Even at MIT, she was known for her getting laughs. “I taught tongue-in-cheek ‘Charm School’ classes at MIT because a dean there thought we needed to bring humor to the lack of social skills at MIT,” Lakshminarayanan says. “It was the first time I made an audience laugh out loud while

simultaneously educating them.”

Paul Levy, her mentor/instructor at MIT, recalls Lakshminarayanan's classes. “Dhaya always had an ability to find humor in day-to-day situations,” says Levy, currently the CEO of Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital, a Harvard-affiliated teaching hospital in Boston. “She never fit the definition of a corporate employee. She was way too irreverent for that, always finding the odd edge of humor in all situations.”

Despite her nontraditional job, Lakshminarayanan is proud to proclaim herself a nerd. As host of WGBH's “High School Quiz Show” in Boston, she gets to show off a perfect combination of being nerdy and funny. She wants folks to know you can be beautiful and nerdy at the same time and “yes, you can be cool and still study.”

“I am not atypical from most desis in America,” Lakshminarayanan says. “I learned to play piano and violin. I was on the math team. I

entered many spelling bees. I took almost a dozen AP (advanced placement) classes. I did indeed take Bharata Natyam.”

But, she always knew her family was different from her friends', whether it was in Buffalo, N.Y.; Cleveland; or Birmingham, Ala., where they lived. She was always one of few Indian kids in the schools that she attended. “I was aware that my house smelled different, my grandmother lived with me and my uncles wore dhotis, or ‘white skirts’ as my American friends called them,” she recalls. “I wondered, why did my uncles do yard work in dhotis?”

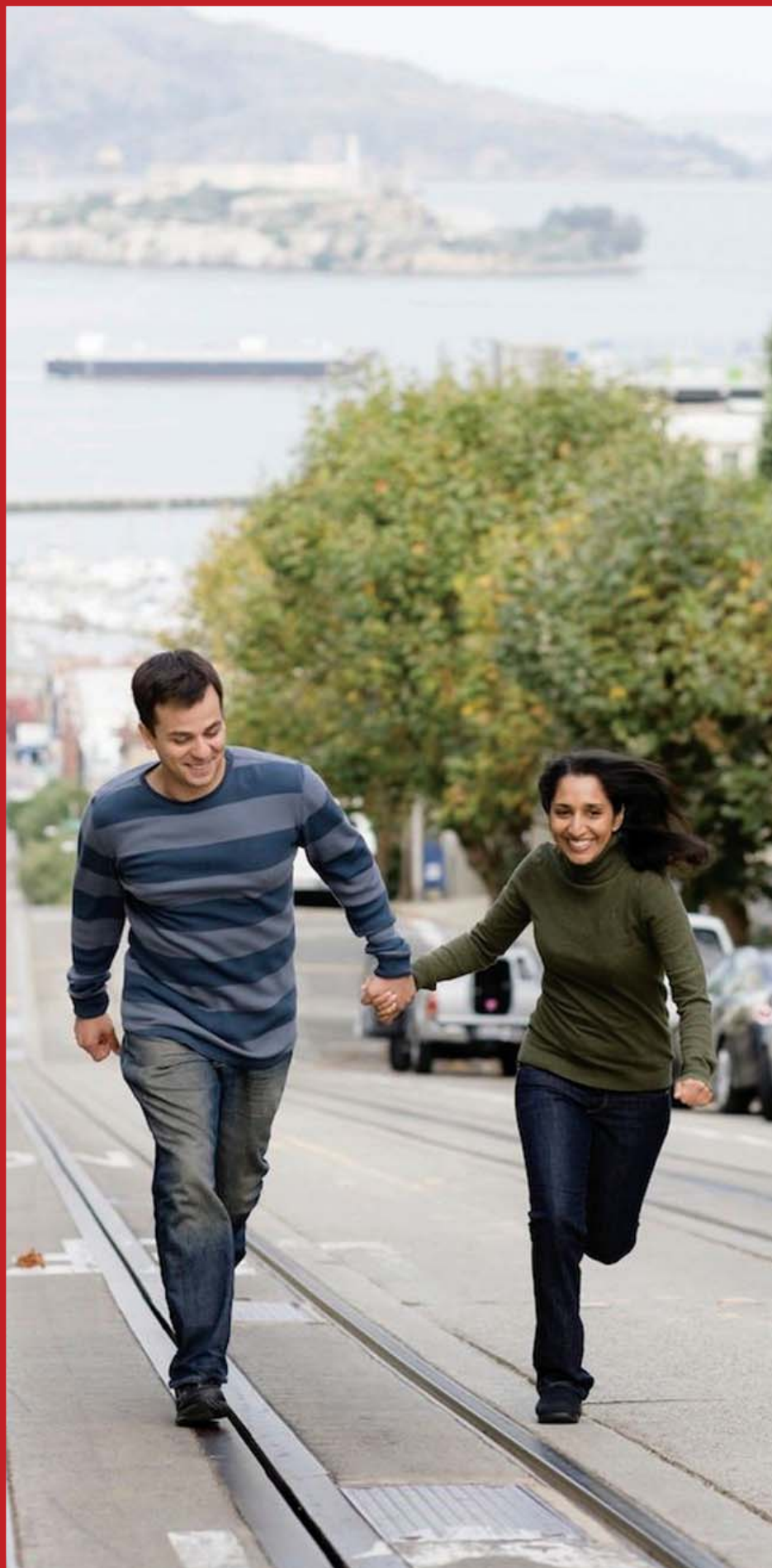
For her parents, A.V. and Hema Lakshminarayanan, raising children who were goal-oriented and proud of their culture was important. They faced struggles, but their children's education seems to always have driven their decisions. While they have strong Indian roots they haven't been afraid of doing what Americans do best – reinventing

themselves. Hema graduated with a degree in Tamil literature in India and has since got degrees in library science and computer science in the United States. A.V. has a Ph.D. in physics, but has moved on to more technical fields such as MRIs.

Lakshminarayanan's mother is the eldest of five siblings, and lost her father when she was 9. She saw firsthand how horrible it was for a widow in India and had to grow up very quickly. She took it upon herself to become independent. Lakshminarayanan credits much of her own ability to be independent to the influence of her mother.

Lakshminarayanan's brother, Venkat, and she were both treated as equals, raised to achieve their goals and stand up for themselves. Her brother is now completing his Ph.D. in economics at Yale.

Having a direct connection to their roots was also an important part of her upbringing. Despite the cost, the family would travel to India on a regular basis. As ▶



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◆ a child, Lakshminarayanan recalls, she would sometimes forget English by the time she got back to the United States after visiting India. “When the teacher asked me what I did over the summer, I froze and said, ‘I rode an elephant.’” Everyone laughed and assumed that I made it up.”

She has been getting plenty of laughs since then. Her cultural roots, her parents, her MIT education, being a nerd, corporate America, San Francisco and the South are all part of her performance. And her comedy can even be directed at herself: “Even with my MIT degrees, I call my dad when my wireless network goes down.”

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

But even as she pokes fun of all these aspects, it's clear that she is proud of these experiences and her Indian culture. Take her somewhat difficult-to-pronounce last name. She could have shortened it, but chose not to. She explains in her comedy routine that father once got out of a ticket because the judge couldn't pronounce his last name. She knew from then on that she was keeping the name.

“If Americans can say the name Nomar Garciaparra, (former Boston Red Sox player) they can say Lakshminarayanan,” she says. But she also shows on stage how important her name is to her. “Being Indian-American is not just about skin color, going to the temple, it's also about acceptance of our names as well.”

That attitude has won her the respect of fellow comedians.

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◆ visibility by being true to herself and her experiences of the Indian culture, how she was raised and what her beliefs are, while delivering a punchy and humorous set,” says comedian Ron Vigh. “However, what echoes far beyond Dhaya’s diminutive and unassuming stature is her ability to command the stage as she speaks from her true voice of experience with very clever yet accessible punch lines.”

The 30-something Lakshminarayanan is petite – about 5 feet – and weighs about 98 pounds. When she steps up on stage, the audience “sees a small woman ... and wonders, ‘Is she going to pass out or start crying?’” Yet, it is the chance to interact with the audience that attracts Lakshminarayanan. “I like the independence of stand-up – just me and the audience. You can’t hide behind a prop, lighting can’t help you, and someone reading lines won’t help either,” she says. “It’s like being your own entrepreneur – you either fail or succeed. You have to truly believe you are funny and love to see people laugh.”

Her performance transcends gender and culture. “Dhaya is not a female comedian or even an Indian comedian. She is a talented stand-up comic who happens

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to be a smart Indian woman,” says Joe Kloeck, a San Francisco-based comedian. “By being funny first and her sex or heritage second, I think a crowd walks away with a much better view of Indian women.”

Lakshminarayanan is part of the Mahatma Moses Tour, which has a tagline: “A Jew, An Indian Jew and an Indian.” Comedian Sam Koletkar, known as the “Indian Seinfeld,” chose Dhaya to be part of the tour because she is smart and funny. “There aren’t that many female Indian comedians on the circuit so it’s good to see that voice and point of view on stage,” he says. “Dhaya brings a unique perspective. I am happy to have her on the tour.”

While she knows she is blazing a new trail, Lakshminarayanan acknowledges several influences, among them Bill Cosby. The American comedian’s way of telling stories about his life and family seems akin to the style of comedy that she gravitates to. “Bill Cosby is an educator and has a social purpose. He still makes it relevant – he is clean, no below-the-belt jokes,” she says.

Lakshminarayanan is also a fan of Jon Stewart and appreciates his “sarcastic observations about society and politics,” Chris

◆ Rock and Jerry Seinfeld.

As for inspirations on breaking ground as a new ethnic comedian, “Richard Pryor paved the way for black comedians, Margaret Cho did that for Chinese comedians and Russell Peters did that for Indian comedians,” Lakshminarayanan says. “Russell Peters opened stand-up for a whole new audience. He was a pioneer and he created a market for a target group that has disposable income but had not thought to attend a stand-up performance as a source of entertainment.”

By far the biggest influence on her imitations of others to metaphors and observational skills is her mother. “She is the funniest comedienne I have ever met,” Lakshminarayanan says.

Beyond her work on stage, Lakshminarayanan wants to make a positive impact wherever she goes. She is involved with the New York-based American India Foundation. Lata Krishnan, the foundation’s co-founder and former CEO, personally chose Lakshminarayanan to host a recent gala. “Dhaya’s smart wit, intellect and ability to connect with any audience in the most personal manner make her a comedienne of a unique kind,” Krishnan says. “In my mind, she represents the *crème de la crème* of the U.S. and India.”

PURSUIT OF PASSIONS

As far as her relationship status, Lakshminarayanan is looking for someone who is her intellectual, spiritual and emotional equal and who values the importance of raising children.

She encourages others to not let the fear of failure stop them from pursuing their passions. But she does offer a cautionary warning: “I am able to do all that I do because, like a smart *desi*, I saved money so I could have a reserve of cash in case I needed it while pursuing my dreams in stand-up.”

She still consults on strategy, branding, marketing, public speaking and negotiations. “All the skills I learned in business, I use in comedy to advocate for myself,” Lakshminarayanan says. “Half of show business is busi-



A SOURCE OF PRIDE

Over the last few decades I’ve probably watched thousands of hours of comedy-related events, live performances, television and big-screen shows in New York, Chicago, Toronto, Seattle and San Francisco, and never have I seen an Indian woman comedian.

Gender aside, the most famous Indian-American comedian is Russell Peters. He has this unique ability to leverage his humor to Indian-Americans, NRIs and Indians alike. His quote about his father saying, “Somebody is going to get hurt real bad,” resonates with all Indians and is often jokingly referred to during a Sunday brunch gathering.

I’ve always been considered a woman with a funny bone and have had friends and colleagues tell me that I should do improv or stand-up comedy because they haven’t seen an Indian woman do it. Being witty and bantering with others who have a knack for being comical is

ness.”

Judging by others’ evaluation of her skills, it looks as though Lakshminarayanan may not need to dip into her cash reserves. “Keep an eye out for her. She’s going to go places,” says Lisa Geduldig, producer of the Funny

easy when you don’t have to perform in front of an audience full of strangers.

Even before I met or watched Dhaya Lakshminarayanan perform, I had a profound sense of respect for her desire and ability to take on the challenge of the stand-up comedy circuit. I first saw her perform at a show called *Funny Girlz* that also featured Shazia Mirza, a Briton of Pakistani origin, and Carla Clay, an African-American.

Lakshminarayanan’s ability to transition voices from the classic California/Hollywood accent to a thick south Indian one to a thick southern drawl was extremely impressive. The crowd loved her. She mimicked her mother’s accent while sharing the story about how her brother failed the spelling bee. She made fun of her time in the South – the challenges of being a brown woman there – and she even made local jokes about not having a car and her experiences on the 38 L Muni line. She had the ability to connect with

the audience on a local level and share ethnic jokes that they could feel comfortable laughing about.

Ken Sabot, my sister-in-law’s father, found that the stories that Dhaya shared were similar to those his American family laughed about at the dinner table.

Thanks to pioneers such as Lakshminarayanan, Sabot’s 6-month-old granddaughter, Anai Sadhya, will grow up in a world where being an Indian-American woman comedian will be just another career option – along with becoming a doctor or an engineer.

As for me, I probably will never stand up in front of a large audience and do a comedy routine, but I do look forward to hearing someone say to me, “You remind me of that famous Indian woman comedian Dhaya Lakshminarayanan I watched on television.” When that happens, I will take it as a very big compliment indeed.

– SHIRLEY THOMAS

Girlz and *Color of Funny* comedy tours. “And besides being a great comic, she’s wonderfully personable and kind.”

Lakshminarayanan’s first name actually means compassion in Sanskrit. It is also a calling. “Having a spiritual practice is key

for doing the kind of work I do,” she says. “It also keeps me focused on why I do it – to create a positive social impact and what is really important – not fame for the sake of fame, but being a happy person who practices compassion.”