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C2 THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Lawyers are serious about stand-up for a good cause



DAVE BROWN

Life is funny when seen through the eyes of a stand-up comedian, but oddly, even funnier when viewed by Gord Paynter, a comic and motivational speaker who happens to be blind.

He'll be the main attraction when Ottawa's legal community gets together Jan. 27 for Lawyers' Comedy Night in support of its favourite charity, Reach Canada. Reach helps disabled persons get a fair shake. It can claim credit for details like more access for the disabled, including banking machines that can be reached from a wheelchair.

Law practitioners gathered Thursday night at Yuk Yuk's on Elgin Street for show preparation, and it was evident they intend to stick to

the concept of improvisation. The club wasn't yet open and the half-dozen show planners were kicking around ideas. They were into the serious side of being funny.

Leaving the serious stuff to the planners, I asked club manager Howard Wagman for Paynter's phone number. Wagman was sitting in his palatial office, which also serves as the box office and has room for a chair and little else. He said it was a funny thing, but he was planning to call the main man anyway.

When Paynter picked up at

his home in Brantford, Wagman started by inviting him to play in a golf tournament this coming summer. These are professional funny guys. Was it a put-on? Wagman covered the mouthpiece with a hand and said: "Great golfer. He got a hole-in-one last summer."

The plan was to arrange time for a telephone interview the following morning. When that call was made, home-to-home, Paynter started by apologizing for a delay in getting to the phone. "I was out shovelling

the walk."

First question: How blind are you?

"Zero vision," said the 55-year-old. The next few minutes were a demonstration of why he adds "motivational speaker" to his list of talents. He explained how blindness, brought on in his early 20s by diabetes, "helped me see life in a different way, but clearly. I learned I didn't have time to play 'poor me.' Golf is about the swing. Line me up to the ball, and I can play. Shovelling? I live here. I know my property."

He writes a column called "The Way I See It" for the *Brantford Expositor*. Thirty years ago he was a teacher when he accepted a challenge to get on stage at a Yuk Yuk's in Toronto. The comedy outlets are acknowledged launching pads for comics. Encouraged by the laughter, he began his stand-up career.

Lawyer Michael Crystal did stand-up at a Yuk Yuk's in Montreal. Howard Wagman was the manager there at the time.

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Brown: Keen observers

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Crystal worked his way through law school as a comedian. He chose a career in law over one in laughs. He articulated in St. John's, Newfoundland, and during those hungry times, entered regular stand-up competitions where first prize was \$1,000 and second a case of coolers — mixed alcoholic drinks. First prize supplemented the income, and finishing second made losing easier to bear.

Crystal's criminal law office is sponsoring the coming comedy night, and Michael will be one of the warm-up acts. There's room for crossover between comedy and law, he says. "Comics have to be keen observers of human behaviour. I spent five years as a prosecutor in St. John's, and learned you have to be an observer there, too."

He said he sometimes found a "lofty" attitude among those who practise law, and found "humour a great leveller. But it's a tricky business. It may help you connect with

people, but there's also a danger it can affect your credibility. I remember dropping a quip in a St. John's court, and hearing the judge warn me I wasn't in a comedy club."

Master of ceremonies will be Justice Colin Mackinnon, one of the funniest lawyers in the capital and much sought after as an entertainer and speaker until his appointment to the bench. At Thursday's gathering, he referred to comedy as "the last bastion of free speech." Other warm-uppers are lawyer James Ford and mediator Steven Gaon.

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Lawyers' Comedy Night

Wed., Jan. 27 at Library and Archives Canada. Tickets are \$60 with half of that tax deductible. Price includes parking, pre- and post-show receptions, show start time 5:30 p.m. For tickets call 613-236-6636 or e-mail paulaagulnik@reach.ca.