

MESA VERDE

Living

**Mathnasium:
Making a
Positive Impact**
page 7

**Neighborhood Hero:
Heather Plascencia**
page 13

**I Heart Costa Mesa
Supports the
Community with
Love and Kindness**
page 15

MEET CLAIRE RATFIELD
Teacher and Comedienne
Extraordinaire
page 8





Yellow arrow points to 33-year old Claire in 1979.

Regulars at the Belly Room, Mitzu Shoen's alternative-action effort for women comedy, in 1979. That's Mitzu (seated from the right), Lotus Weinrock, Lenny Bruce's first girlfriend, long on the list; Marston Murphy, with blonde hair, third from the left in the middle row; Emily Levine at the center rear; and Sandra Bernhard at the far right. (more anecdotal, unshown)

BY SON VU
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHASTIN FLETCHER

Claire Ryan Ratfield is a force to be reckoned with. Retired in 2017 from a 48-year teaching career, now at 76 years old, Claire has rekindled her other passion for comedy and is currently headlining stand-up comedy shows around Costa Mesa.

Teaching Career

Claire is a self-proclaimed true “Destiny’s child, as one who greatly benefitted from the synchronicity of tragic and fortuitous events that shaped my and my family’s life,” she said.

In 1969, while earning her master’s degree in Arizona, she was hired by the Newport-Mesa School District (NMUSD) as a teacher at Lincoln Elementary in Newport Beach. NMUSD was recruiting from Arizona in the hopes that hiring Arizona teachers would allow them to pay at the entry level pay scale. What NMUSD failed to notice was that Claire was indeed in a master’s program, and she brought it to their attention. “With an audible gasp, they realized they had made a mistake,” said Claire with a smile.

Teaching is her “heart’s work.” In Claire’s teaching career, she won numerous teaching awards and was the first teacher in the nation to achieve double National Board Certification.

She was runner-up for Orange County Teacher of the Year, and received a Teaching Excellence Award from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth at the White House in a Rose Garden Ceremony.

She has also mentored over 100 teachers through the National Board Certification process from



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San Diego to Ventura. One of her most memorable mentoring moments was when she had a group of seven teachers from the Long Beach area. “I had just returned from the Emergency Room with an IV still in my arm. I lay sprawled out on the couch, giving advice, while the seven teachers eagerly listened to my every word,” said Claire. Her dedication to teaching teachers hasn’t faltered, and she mentored a teacher as recently as last year.

Finding Comedy as Therapy

While teaching is her primary calling, Claire discovered she had a natural talent for comedy. A traumatic and brutal physical attack in 1973 led her to the comedic stage. After being attacked by her apartment, Claire’s parents thought she should see a therapist. She thanked them for caring but decided she’d try comedy for therapy, and enrolled herself in George Carlin’s comedy class. She spent six weeks learning comedy writing from George Carlin himself.

After the class was over, Claire attended an “open mike” at the famed Comedy Store in Hollywood, and in one session, landed a Masters of Ceremonies job on the weekends in the



Main Room. Later, along with several other comedienne, Claire helped open up the Belly Room at the Comedy Store, a dedicated space for comedienne to work out material.

While living in Costa Mesa, Claire only performed in LA on the weekends. In the summers, she traveled on tour with Shirley Hemphill, star of the TV show “What’s Happening.”

Fellow comedian Robin Williams continually urged Claire to quit teaching and seek out comedy as a career.

But the 1979 Comedy Store strike would alter the course of Claire’s life again. After the strike led one of the comics to jump to his death from the roof of the Hyatt Regency into the Comedy Store parking lot, Claire saw the “horrific event served as a wake-up call.” She left the limelight and returned to teaching.

Creative Arts

Despite the tragic event, Claire still believed in the performing arts, she wanted to provide a “creative opportunity for children to reach beyond their grasp.” She began producing and directing musicals for the kids at California, TeWinkle and Lincoln. As the saying goes, it takes a tribe. “It was a great synergy of diverse personalities, all united by our dedication to the children ... cooperating, collaborating, and risk-taking.”

The show performances not only brought out the talent in the children, but “synchronized a wealth of community talent.” Ernie Towler, a local Costa Mesa artist and a member of the California Elementary community, would ultimately work with Claire as her set designer for the next 38 years. “The sets were so beautiful, they would have made Segerstrom cry,” said Claire.

A slew of other community members came forth and helped with designing, sewing, choreography and so much more. The plays became so sophisticated, a Hollywood producer asked her if the shows cost \$100,000 to produce. He was stunned when she replied it was only \$20,000 due to generous community in-kind donations.

Terry and Ryan

While students and producing shows kept her busy, Claire’s life was made complete by her late husband, Terry. They met over 45 years ago, right after he passed the California bar exam. “He was perfect. It was a 44-year joy ride, walking alongside him, wide-eyed, and holding his hand as we entered a whole new world together,” said Claire.

Terry worried so much about her during the times she would stay up for 48 hours straight working on the children’s show productions, that he suggested she take a break for a few years from producing the shows. Claire didn’t want to deny students the life-changing opportunity of performing in the shows, so she shared a happy marriage strategy she learned in a psychology class: each spouse makes a list of the top ten things they need, of which, the top three are non-negotiable. His number one was traveling, and hers was producing and directing shows for the kids.

Claire and Terry’s

WHEN TERRY RETIRED FROM LAW IN 2000, CLAIRE WAS STILL TEACHING, SO HE AND HIS CLOSEST COLLEGE FRIEND, BILL ORCUTT, TRAVELED ALL OVER THE US AND EUROPE. WHILE SHE HAPPILY DIRECTED HER STUDENTS IN “BEAUTY AND THE BEAST,” TERRY AND BILL WERE HAPPILY SIPPING WINE IN BUDAPEST.

marriage was great but was made even better when their son, Ryan, was born in 1986. That was the year they moved to Mesa Verde’s State Streets, just a block away from California Elementary.

Terry was 51 and she was 40 when Ryan

came into the world. Terry joked about their age difference, that it was great they had a child, “I’ll be dead and you’ll have to raise him.”

Ryan grew and became his dad’s clone, not just physically, but he shared his dad’s joyful personality. Terry and Ryan were the best of friends and were each other’s greatest confidants.

Claire found that raising Ryan in Costa Mesa “ushered in another level of community involvement.” She was his soccer coach, all the way from Pee Wee Soccer until he turned 15. When he became a Boy Scout, she was troop leader. Terry retired around this time and turned into “Domestic Dad” – he cooked, cleaned and cared for Ryan while Claire continued coaching, acting as troop leader, but also teaching and producing plays.

Sadly, Terry passed away in January 2022 from leukemia. His death left Claire “wanting to quit everything, find a crawl space and rock back and forth in a catatonic state.” But her neighbors, John and Dona rushed to her side, and the neighborhood took turns bringing her a home-cooked meal daily. Her friends in Newport Beach, led by her closest friend Anne Gordinier, also organized meals for her. “Not only did they provide nourishment,” Claire said, “they supported my spirit and soul.”





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“Claire on Medicare”

After retiring from teaching, Claire returned to performing comedy at local venues like The Harp Inn and Dirty Nelly’s with the goal of perfecting enough material to create a comedy special to raise money for teacher staff development or other charities.



Claire and Ryan want to give a whole-hearted “thank you to their amazing neighbors who provided meals and emotional support after the loss of Terry. Also, she wants to “thank the sponsors and advertisers whose generous support keeps such a powerful community building magazine like *Mesa Verde Living* going.” She encourages neighbors to use the services of the local sponsors and advertisers when the need arises.

You can see Claire perform locally at The Harp Inn, the Amazing Comedy Theater and other venues. Check her website at www.clairecomedyextraordinaire.com for upcoming performances.

CLAIRE’S OPENING LINES:

“HI, MY NAME IS CLAIRE, AND AS YOU CAN SEE BY MY FACE, I’M ON MEDICARE. I’M SURE YOU ARE WONDERING WHY A 76-YEAR OLD WOMAN IS DOING COMEDY. YOU SEE, I HAVE A BIG ADVANTAGE OVER YOUNGER COMEDIANS. IF I FORGET MY MATERIAL, I’M ADORABLE. IF THEY FORGET THEIR MATERIAL, THEY LOOK LIKE LOSERS!”



During the COVID lockdowns and restrictions in 2020-2021, Claire was encouraged by Terry to keep writing and “performing” in her garage in front of a “Fan Wall” with pictures of friends and family. She also performed in a neighbor’s backyard.

After Terry’s passing, Claire has pressed on with her comedy, and plans to live the rest of her life making Terry proud and living his motto, “Go Big or Go Home!” She practices her comedy sets in front of a poster of him, which says, “Do It Like Terry Would.” She is performing and practicing her material in public regularly, and she is thankful for her group of friends, her “comedy posse,” who regularly attend her shows. She is also thankful for her dog, Rudy, and most of all, her son, Ryan, who has “provided me the most stability.” Ryan moved back in with her when she needed him most.

Claire feels gratitude for the life she has lived and continues to live, even in Terry’s absence. “It’s better to aim for the moon and miss, than aim for the gutter and hit it.”

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