

Side Splitters... a Legacy of Laughter

Bobby Jewell Finds Diamonds in the Rough

Written by Deborah Kelley

810 words

Larry the Cable Guy. Ron White. Dom Irrerra. Lisa Lampanelli. Ray Romano....

The large glass-encased before and after photos adorning the walls of the front box office entrance pay tribute to "Who's Who" of comedy all-stars. What do they share in common? They each debuted here.... Not in Manhattan or Los Angeles or any other over-priced trendy locale, but in this suburban, tree-laden affordable location nestled in the Carrollwood Village shopping center.

Seated in the lobby bar, nursing a cold one is one extremely tired Bobby Jewell, stand-up comedienne and owner extraordinaire of Side Splitters located at 12938 North Dale Mabry Highway. Bobby has been busy remodeling the front entrance of his comedy club and today was his designated "D" day. Unfortunately meeting his personal deadline required lack of sleep for the last 48 hours.

Having earned the title of the "Best Entertainment in Carrollwood" by the *Carrollwood Gazette* and multiple "Best of the Bay" awards, Side Splitters has been entertaining patrons for sixteen and a half years with one rule: 18 to laugh, 21 to drink.

When asked how he got his start in the business, Bobby replied that it was a dare that propelled him into the comedy spotlight. "I was playing golf with my dentist, participating in adult beverages and cracking lines and he said I should go to an open mike competition. I told him you set it up, I'll go." Though he confessed he performed horribly the first time out, the owner of club liked him and Bobby honed his craft and landed multiple gigs and later an investment in a little club in Tampa.

Originally his involvement in Side Splitters was that of a silent partner; however, his business partner's dad fell ill and he took over the operation in 1994. "We've been rocking and rolling ever since. We've played host to some of the greatest comics to ever hit the stage. There's nothing else like this in the world."

And some of the stars do actually remember their roots. "When Larry the Cable was playing last time at Ruth Eckerd Hall, he gave us a bunch a plugs saying I got my start at SideSplitters."

What's especially nice about Side Splitters is an affordable ticket price. Patrons sign up at www.sidesplitters.com and can purchase a Laugh Pak of ten tickets for \$30. "That's like six bucks a ticket," jokes Bobby. "No seriously, it's our way of saying thank you."

Though not always applicable to headlining acts, those who register do get first email notification of available seats.

It's a very inviting, casual atmosphere where patrons sit to watch the performers. Said Bobby, "There's nothing sterile about the room. It's warm, cozy, intimate. There's a couch on the stage. It's a set, a living room, and that's how we want to make people feel."

Much like his comfortable set is Bobby's relationship with the community. Bobby takes great pride that Side Splitters has made such a positive impact and its charitable involvement includes "a couple thousand organizations" like the Alzheimer's Association, Moffitt Cancer Center and hundreds of fundraisers over the years. One notable instance was a young man seriously injured in a motorcycle accident that Bobby remembers fondly. "He had no insurance. We put on a fundraiser. Comics volunteered. Alcohol was donated. We held a silent auction. We were able to make a pile of money for him."

Not only does Side Splitters host better-known entertainers, but an Open Mic night for newbies to test their comedic chops. One hundred and sixty participants from all over the state vie for a trip to the Aspen Comedy Festival, co-sponsored by Roof Top Comedy. "We have the best open mike program in the country, hands-down." Bobby punctuates his sentence with a hand slap on the bar. "Hands down."

Another opportunity to get behind the mike comes with RockStar Karaoke on alternating Fridays following the comedy performances. Audience members have the chance to grab a microphone, a lyric sheet and get on stage and temporarily live out a rock star fantasy as the lead singer of the rock band, MunkeyFist, competing for cash and prizes.

After running the business as long as he has, Bobby retains the kind of enthusiasm one would expect in a youngster. He's a maverick. He puts it better, "I've had the opportunity to make wonderful friendships over the years – whether with entertainers, customers, or employees. When you dig what you do, you *never* go to work."

A huge sports enthusiast and still a performer at heart, in his free time, Bobby tours with long-time pal, comedienne Dom Irrerra specifically selecting "areas that host the NCAA Final Four or the Super Bowl...."

When asked what his future plans were, Bobby quipped, "After I finish this interview and my beer, I'm going to get something to eat and sleep till Wednesday."

Pleasant dreams, Bobby.

