

Solange De Santis

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Mavis Pickett found healing through humor

By Solange De Santis

Have you heard the one about ... the woman whose daughter died in a terrible ski accident and later found healing through comedy?

Doesn't sound that funny, you say? It isn't at first, but it's a true story that began with tragedy and continues with hope and it happened to Mavis Pickett, now a 73-year-old stand-up comic, counselor and wedding co-ordinator at Holy Trinity Anglican Cathedral in New Westminster, B.C. The awful date that marks this phase of Ms. Pickett's adventurous life was March 24, 1996, when her youngest child, Mavis Anne, was skiing on B.C.'s Blackcomb Mountain, caught some glare ice and plunged 900 feet off a cliff. She was 30. "She wasn't doing anything dangerous. It was really an unfortunate accident," said Ms. Pickett in an interview.

Formerly a teacher at the University of Manitoba, Ms. Pickett found support in her church community, but she also moved outside herself and her grief. She decided to train as a counsellor at Century House Seniors' Centre in New Westminster.

"In peer counselling, one of the lectures was on humour and healing. I thought I would take that course," she said. But she turned up in the wrong classroom. "The instructor, (psychotherapist) David Granirer, said, 'Are you in the right course?' There were about 15 in the class. Fourteen of them looked about 12 ½ years old and I looked about 96. Then he wrote on the blackboard 'Stand-Up Comedy Clinic.' I just about died," she recalled.

Mindful of the healing properties of humour, Mr. Granirer urged her to stick with the course.

"Then he told us the exam was (performing) at a comedy club and I said, 'No way.' He said, 'You really should finish what you start' – just like my mother – so I said 'I will do it once,'" she said. She also thought of her daughter. "I sat down and thought, 'If you want to honour Mavis Anne, this (not to finish the course) is the worst way. She would be so disappointed.' She thought I could do anything," she said.

Quite literally getting her act together, she performed for eight minutes at Laff Lines in New Westminster. The class taught her the importance of bringing on stage a strong persona – a character type with a particular point of view, such as the late Rodney Dangerfield's hapless "I don't get no respect" act. Ms. Pickett decided that hers was "a senior trying hard to keep up but who doesn't quite make it."

For instance: "You know, as a senior, you have to be careful that people don't take advantage of you. I took my car into the service station and the man said, 'I'd like to rotate your tires.' 'Well, no thank you,' I said, 'the car does that when I drive.'"

Sometimes, her material got a little risqué: "You know sometimes people don't understand you when you're a senior. I was talking with an older friend of mine when he started looking me up and down, especially down. I said, 'I don't understand what you're looking at. I said I have acute *angina*.'"

Word spread about "the senior doing comedy" and Ms. Pickett was profiled on CBC Radio, Vision TV, the *Mike Bullard Show* and other national and local shows and newspapers. Working without an agent, she often performs at convention banquets. This year, she is booked for the Red Hat Society (a social group for women 50 and older) convention in April, a Jewish charity fundraiser in June and the Vancouver Island Funvention (another Red Hat Society event) in September – so far.

She brings humour and the same sense of empathy to her volunteer work at the cathedral, where she advises brides and grooms on locations for flowers and candles, limousine parking and the vagaries of a church built in 1899 (washrooms are in the parish hall). She also attends rehearsals and ceremonies. "Yes, I have told a joke to a nervous bride – I can't think of one now – but mostly I'm just grandma being there. Most of it is: 'Are my flowers okay? Is my mum here? Is Joe (the groom) here?'" she said.

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Divorced since 1974, Ms. Pickett also enjoys spending time with her son Ed, daughter Marva Cotroneo and her four grandchildren.

Doing comedy helped her cope with Mavis Anne's death in the same way that a delicate approach toward humour helps some of her counselling recipients. She talks about a change of focus. "I had difficulty concentrating (after the accident). What people said was words, words, nothing but words. Just focusing was hard," she said.

When she counsels people, she discovers their interests and starts conversations on those topics, sometimes including a little humour. "If you can pull their focus out for a little while, it's a start," she said. It has worked for her, too. "When Mavis Anne died, it was like the picture where you either see the black vase or the white profile. I saw only the black, negative side. But every once in a while, I could see the white, positive side. Now, it's mostly the white side, but I may see the negative side. The negative is always part of the picture, part of your life," but the ability to shift focus helps, she said.

Onstage, "you do become another person. I sound different. Once you flip to that other spot, then you have a hiatus from where you were. I might as well be in comedy, laughing for a little while, than where I was at," said Ms. Pickett.

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Solange De Santis
318 McNabb Crescent
Milton, Ontario L9T 3G2
Canada

Phone 905-878-5548
Fax 905-878-2373

solange@solangedesantis.com