



Laughing Out Loud!

By Reyna Jacqueline Peña on May 21, 2010

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Things are taking off for Chicago-native [Gwen La Roka](#), comedienne, actress, activist and a true artist. Only officially doing stand-up since 2009, her comedic skills have been finely-honed over the years—and it shows. In recent months, she's been cracking up audiences all over Chicagoland. She warmly invited me into her home last week and we quickly got to talking, and laughing, about her experience as a comedienne in Chicago.

So, when did you know you wanted to be a comedian?

I've always been in love with the arts, in every form. I started young as a b-girl and fell in love with hip-hop. Grew up listening to the realness like A Tribe Called Quest, Common, Guru, EPMD, The Beatnuts, real hip-hop. I started breakin', got into graff and dug every element of hip-hop. It's who I am, a part of me, just like my goofy and funny personality that always had me dreaming of becoming a comedienne and actress. I emcee, I'm a poet, I write; would love to try radio broadcasting. But through all of that, I love acting and I love comedy. I was always a big ham. A while ago I found an old VHS tape of me as a kid imitating Jim Carrey characters, all Fire Marshall Bill about it. [Gwen does Fire Marshall Bill: "Lemme show ya somethin'!!!" Reyna laughs.] Recently, too, I found some old notebooks, with jokes and other notes in them. You know how you can just tell something is old because of the way your writing looks? I could tell the notebooks were old-school based on the graff handwriting alone. Then, I read them and noticed I had all these dumb-ass jokes in them. I would write little skits and jokes and now I realize what I was actually doing: writing material, and I was just a kid. It's something I always wanted to do.

How did you get started in the biz?

My first stand-up gig was at [Cheap Shots Comedy](#) in Forest Park and managed to get some gigs after that, too. Then, I got an email about a [Mikey O](#) workshop and my first Mikey O gig happened not too long after that, in January. Things have just been rolling like that ever since. One show after another, thank God. I started off in theater, then improv at [Second City](#). Even when I was eight or nine, I did some short after-school, educational film where I played this bully's friend. I loved it immediately. A few years ago I was in [The Vagina Monologues](#) at UIC for four years in a row and I was able to connect to that for so many reasons. I also got to work with [Teatro Luna](#) in their production [Machos](#), a meaningful, sad, funny, and real play about men and their stories as men. It was really awesome to be a part of that. And, after all that, I was on a short hiatus. But when the Mikey O workshop came along, I jumped on it and have been focusing on my stand-up career ever since.



What advice would you give to someone trying to be a stand-up comic?

I would say just do it. I used to think, "Well, I'm funny because I bounce off people in conversation. I can't do stand-up though." If you think you can't write material, you have to push through it and get past it. I had to learn to create my material and basically, it's like having a conversation with yourself on paper. In my experience, the comedy scene has been extremely supportive. Mikey O does a great job of getting us to help each other—not only as Latinas and Latinos, but as comics. Period. He's totally all-inclusive because if you're funny, you're funny, and you're on his stage, and that's it. But, we all promote each other and help each other out. It makes me feel good to help other comics out—and people in general—and not because I expect something in return but just because it's the right thing to do and that makes me feel good. But, yeah, get out there and do it is what I say. Create your own opportunities.

I, personally, think you are hilarious. But, have you ever encountered any lame or hostile audiences?

Not myself, fortunately. Not yet anyway. But just like everything else in the fucking world, you get treated differently for being a female. Some of my fellow comedienne friends have had the unfortunate experience of being perceived differently just for looking cute on stage. The moment you see a pretty girl—maybe all decked out with heels and a mini-skirt or something—step out on stage, she gets received differently. So, obviously that hasn't happened to me. [Gwen laughs] But either way, just for being a female, it can be twice as hard. And that sucks because is there *anything* in world that isn't harder for us because we have a vagina? It's unfortunate. Women should have the right to dress how they want, be sexy if they want or dress down if they want. We should just be allowed to be us, whatever it is.

What do you think makes for a good comedian?

Truth. The key is honesty. Obviously, you may need to exaggerate or use something to segue or something of that nature but I think people vibe off the truth. If you come out and speak in a way that's not from truth or something you are not passionate about, you may lose your audience. But, if you come out and just talk about something real, like, constipation—and you know every last mofo in that audience has been constipated at some point in their lives—then people will relate to it and laugh.

What other kinds of things are you involved with?

I consider myself an artist, feminist and an activist. I'm on the board of directors for [Orgullo en Accion](#). We do a lot of work in our community, the LGBTQ Latino/Latina community. We put on Chicago's first ever Latino Pride picnic. We'll be having our 5 year anniversary on June 12 in Humboldt Park. I'm also part of [The Venus Collective](#) which is just an awesome collective of mindful, talented women. We recognize that women lack a safe space to get together and be who we are. So, we get together to support each other, and give each other strength. We do that in many ways but mainly through art and helping other women showcase their talent and art. I try to do with my material and sets, too. When I put my personal business out there it really is in the hopes of using that spotlight to voice certain things that people cannot or do not talk about, like body image issues or identity issues. But, not in a preachy way, just in a real way.

So, tell me a joke.

Oh, it's like that, huh? [Gwen does an impression of Reyna: 'Shit, make me laugh. Be my clown, motherfucker! BE MY CLOWN!']

Guess what, Reyna? It doesn't work like that. Okay? [Reyna: laughs]

To get your own laugh on, check out one of her upcoming shows. For more info, be sure to follow her [Facebook](#) fan page.

***Sunday, May 23rd – ROUND 4 of Mikey O's [Last Loco Standing Contest](#) @ Joe's 940 W Weed St! 7pm Only \$5 cover

***Friday, May 28th – Comedy Jam w/Pablo Rodriguez & Joey Villagomez from HBO Latino @ La Aduana 6736 W Cermak Rd, Berwyn, IL Show starts at 8 o'clock sharp

***Tuesday, June 1st – Old Town Pub 1339 North Wells Street

***Monday, June 28th – Hosting Cheap Shots Comedy Show: The Shuckin Grill 410 Circle Ave, Forest Park, IL. 7pm