

Keep 'Em Laughing

BY PAIGE STONE



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There's just something striking about Jeanne Robertson. Maybe it's her beauty queenesque good looks. Or maybe it's that she's six-feet-two inches tall. Regardless of what it is, once you hear her speak, you'll remember her—that is, if you can quit laughing long enough to catch your breath . . .

"I'm not a comedian," insists Jeanne Robertson. "I don't tell any jokes. I don't think I could."

What Jeanne will admit to being is a humorist, and she makes clear the difference between the two. "A comedian's main goal is to make people in the audience laugh at any cost. They can say things that hurt people or use off-color language. The humorist's goal is to make you laugh just as much by telling true stories that all people can identify with and aren't offensive," she says.

For more than forty years, Jeanne has been entertaining and motivating crowds across the country, speaking at conventions, seminars, workshops, and even graduations. Commanding attention with her distinguished southern accent and tall stature—six-feet-two-inches tall with her hair "mashed" down to be exact, she says—Jeanne talks to her audiences about the importance of having a sense of humor. From her childhood days in Graham, North Carolina, to married life, Jeanne uses her every day situations to create her crowd-pleasing tales.

Oddly enough, it was Jeanne's decision to participate in her hometown's beauty pageant that helped shape the

rest of her life as a professional speaker. While attending Auburn University, the physical education major was crowned Miss Graham, and she went on to become Miss North Carolina. To fulfill her royal duties, Jeanne traveled around the state to speak at a variety of social and business organizations. The then nineteen-year-old made more than 500 speeches—and she competed in the Miss America Pageant. "I developed a reputation that year of being funny," she says. "People would have me come to speak and I would just be funny. There was no message to it. I just had a lot of stories and my own material, so I basically just entertained, playing my ukulele and singing funny songs I had written. I didn't realize at the time it could be a career."

Jeanne didn't become Miss America—she was named Miss Congeniality and jokes she came in forty-ninth—but she did find herself on a career path that kept her quite busy. "I gave up the crown on a Saturday night, and the following Tuesday I started speaking at conventions," she says.

Along with being a full-time teacher and coach, Jeanne's on-the-side speaking business started taking up more and more of her time. She says, "My speaking career just kept

BELOW: Former Miss North Carolina, Jeanne Robertson has won numerous awards for her natural ability to make crowds laugh. In 2001, she was named the North Carolinian of the Year. In 1998, Jeanne was the recipient of the Golden Gavel, and in 1989, she received the highest honor of the National Speakers Association, the Cavett Award.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF STEVE EXUM



getting bigger and bigger. I realized that if I learned how to market myself it could be my career. So I stopped teaching and printed some materials, and I started traveling all over the country to speak. The convention world thought I was the hot, new speaker. By then, I had already been speaking for thirteen years, so I wasn't new, but I was new to the nation," she says.

Over her forty-two years as a professional speaker, Jeanne has maintained her ability to keep a crowd laughing, and at times uncontrollably. Whether she's talking about "Left Brain"—her husband, Jerry—or sharing stories about her son, Beaver, Jeanne always takes true stories and weaves them into knee-slapping narratives. And with each tale

ABOVE: "Graham, North Carolina, was such a small town, and I was so tall that I couldn't buy clothes I needed for the Miss America Pageant off the rack. All of the women in town helped me by making gowns and suits and everything. My trip to the pageant became sort of the town project," says Jeanne. Her hometown created a permanent museum exhibit, "Behind Her All the Way," which features many of her pageant dresses, photographs, and awards.

about fiascos while emceeing a beauty pageant or trying to fit into a body suit, Jeanne slips in her words of wisdom on her favorite topic: developing a sense of humor. She says, "Having a sense of humor has little to do with being funny. There are a lot of funny people who don't have a sense of humor but they can say things that are so funny."

At sixty-one, Jeanne is still as active in her speaking career as ever. From her early days entertaining with her ukulele, Jeanne has become an award-winning humorist. "I didn't just win a beauty pageant. I took that opportunity and catapulted it into a successful career. But the main thing is that I get to do what I love. It didn't happen by accident," she says.

In addition to her regular speeches, Jeanne now speaks at shows for senior motor coach travelers, and to her, there is no end in sight. She says, "The door is just opening, and I see me doing this for a long time. Getting older opens up a lot of new doors material wise. So now I have this new material, but I can still go back and tell older stories. It's wonderful." And whatever the subject of her hilariously true tales, it's sure to keep 'em laughing. 🍷

Turn the page to read Jeanne's hilarious-but-true tale, *Bonding with a Sister*.

Bonding with a Sister

BY JEANNE ROBERTSON

Bonding with a sister can be tough when she has more memory than your computer. Once something goes into my sister's brain the door slams shut like a steel trap and keeps it in there until it's to her advantage to pull it out.

"When are you coming over here with my present?"

My sister Katherine's question over the telephone early one afternoon jolted me. Oh my gosh, it was her birthday! Not just any birthday. It was an ugly-zero birthday. Her fiftieth, and I had forgotten it. It was also during a time in our lives when we were working to improve our relationship. Oprah had taught the world about "bonding" and we realized that we needed a dose of it. Nothing I could do but try to "cover."

"Oh, Katherine, I have been meaning to call all day. I didn't get back in town until late. I want to take you out to dinner tonight for your birthday."

She was excited, but the thrill disappeared quickly when she learned "out to dinner" meant accompanying me to a banquet speech for the local Habitat for Humanity. Her exact, deliberate response cut deep. *"Drive to Hollywood, California, with a two-year-old? Maybe. Walk across a bed of hot coals? Perhaps. Listen to you give another speech on my fiftieth birthday? It'll be a cold day in August. When are you coming over here with my present?"*

Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive. *"I was on my way when you called. Are you going to be there or do you want me to bring it tomorrow?"* Hope springs eternal.

"Now is fine."

She caught me. Panic. This gift had to be special, and I was void of ideas and low on time. I knew our younger sister, Andrea, had probably sent the ultimate, never-to-be-forgotten gift of a lifetime from Portland, Oregon, a week earlier. Wrapped beautifully, of course. I needed a topper. Fast.

For a few minutes I debated heading to the mall. Maybe the perfect gift would jump out at me. No, not enough time. A gift certificate from somewhere? Nah. Then it hit me. I was surprised I hadn't thought of it the instant I hung up the phone. I would give Katherine a piece of her good china. Not a jump-up-and-down-about-it gift, but it was something she could always use, and she could pass on to a daughter. And the best part of all? I wouldn't even have to leave the house because Katherine and I have the same china pattern. I'd give her one of my dinner plates. The perfect gift. Problem solved.

Sisters having the identical china pattern was Mother's idea. She figured we could borrow from each other when we had sit-down dinner parties for thirty-six. Mother didn't realize that if thirty-six people are eating at my house they're pulling their entrée off a pig.

I headed into the dining room to find a plate that wasn't chipped. When I pulled one out, my conscience suddenly reared its head. Hmmm. Strange. Why would my conscience get involved with my sister's birthday gift? That's it! The gift was for my sister, for Pete's sake! Her fiftieth birthday, a benchmark in any woman's life. Nooooo. A dinner plate, even in her good china, wouldn't cut it. But my big serving platter would! Yes, the platter! A mega-buck item. Expensive. Guaranteed to beat the Portland sister's gift.

I pulled out the platter, dragged it across my backside to get the dust off and wrapped it in old newspapers. Then

I shoved the padded platter into a brown grocery sack and mashed a used, crumpled, stick-on yellow bow on top. I wouldn't beat the Portland sister on the wrapping but I'd get her on the gift. Off to Graham I went. A seven-mile trip.

Katherine likes presents, and her eyes lit up when I walked in with the big sack. *"For me?"* she said, in faked surprise. We sat down on her sofa, and she tore into the sack. *"Be careful,"* I said. *"It'll break."*

"Obhhhhhh," she teased. *"Breakable? Sounds interesting. How many times have you used this yellow bow?"*

"One time too many" was on the tip of my tongue, but it would have gone into her database until the end of time. I just smiled.

Katherine lifted the newspaper to reveal the gorgeous 11" by 14" platter. I emphasize again...not in her "everyday." The good stuff. Her hands stopped moving as she stared downward, obviously shocked at the enormity of the gift. She finally turned her head upward and our eyes met. She was speechless, maybe even overcome. I smiled again. It was a touching sisterly moment. Perhaps we were "bonding" at long last, I thought. Don't get me wrong. We love each other. We're just...well, we're sisters. Could it be that a simple thing like a platter might lead her to forgive and forget even a few of those small incidents that she keeps stored in that internal whirling database, like the time in high school that she claims I "stretched to jumbo size" her precious, tiny cashmere sweater?

Heaven knows I hear about that every holiday.

She looked back down at the gift, and when a few more seconds passed, she looked up again. This time she squinted at me, and her brow wrinkled as though she were trying to remember something. For the first time, I had the tiniest inkling that the platter might not have been a good idea.

Suddenly, Katherine flipped the platter over and pointed to faded letters on a piece of masking tape on the back. K A T H... *"I thought so! This is my platter! I lent it to you last Christmas! You might as well have stretched my cashmere sweater all over again!"*

Like a steel trap.

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