



The Oregonian

Through the tears, laughter

Leap Year baby Sharon Knorr, now 60 (15 in Leap years), turns pain of losing a child into a stage show

Friday, February 29, 2008

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The Oregonian

Portland actress Sharon Knorr will celebrate her 60th birthday today like few other Leap Year babies.

First, she will open her one-woman show, "Why Can't I Marry the Cute Beatle," telling an audience her story of losing a child to unexpected death.

Second, she will dedicate the performance to the memory of a friend -- one of an unusual threesome, including Knorr, who were born on Leap Day 1948 in Portland and remained classmates until their 1966 graduation from Wilson High School. The friend died in 2005, the year after the three classmates reunited for the first time in nearly four decades.

"Now let me get something straight here," Knorr says in her alternately poignant and funny show. "When your child dies, life does not go on like they keep telling you it will. Life as you knew it does not go on. That life is over.

"In its place, you get a new life. A life your child is not in. A life you do not want."

The story of her son's death from a construction-related wound in 1998 will be one of many shared by Knorr, known to Portland audiences for her roles in "Angry Housewives" and "Hot Flashes: the Musical."

"Why Can't I Marry the Cute Beatle," according to Knorr's Web site, is "about life and death, love and loneliness, growing older and finding the joke in it all."

In an interview, Knorr is pensive as she recalls that her son, Tim -- born shortly after she graduated from Wilson -- accidentally sat on a knife in his truck. Infection soon set in. The 31-year-old framer died within days, leaving a wife and two children.

Knorr, 50 at the time, was devastated.

"You don't want to stay on the planet," says the former dance teacher, still trim and poised. "That's your biggest struggle: to stay on the planet."

Three times married and divorced, she worked through her grief -- and decided to lay her life bare under the hot stage lights, using little more than a stool, a hat rack, a bridal veil and 10 years of wrenching memories.

"It becomes your job to do something with your new life," she says.

Part of Knorr's new life, ironically, was a piece of her old life. From second grade through high school, the now-defunct Oregon Journal ran photos of Knorr and classmates Jan Barnett Mecklem and Pam Clark Chartier each time they celebrated a birthday together. After graduation, they lost touch until a mutual friend helped bring them together for a reunion in February 2004, when they turned "14" years old.

Knorr rekindled her friendship with Mecklem, who was undergoing treatment for stage IV metastatic melanoma. Mecklem died the following year.

"When one of us doesn't make it to her 15th birthday," Knorr says, "you see how fragile life is."

By coincidence, Knorr's performance will take place at the West End Theater, former location of the Sunday school that Knorr and Mecklem attended together as children.

"I got to go over to her house the day before she died," Knorr says. "She was so beautiful and so calm. It was a nice moment, not because she was my best friend, but because we had this bond."

Chartier, a retired school teacher, will celebrate her 15th birthday with family rather than attending Knorr's opening night. Chartier adds that she probably will see the show in the coming month.

Despite the somber overtones of her life, Knorr has a comedian's timing.

Knorr on dating: "Match.com is a way to be rejected by hundreds of people instead of one by one."

Knorr on Leap Year birthdays: "Fifteen is the new 40."

The title of her show, "Why Can't I Marry the Cute Beatle," refers, of course, to former Beatle Paul McCartney, known as the "cute" one.

"Now, there is a guy!!" Knorr declares in the show. "That would certainly be a new life. He's an artistic person in show business . . . like me. Liberal . . . like me. Had a very successful long-term relationship . . . not like me. Rich . . . also not like me."

She hopes her life resonates with her audience.

She also hopes that she can maintain her composure on opening night. "I don't want to do a show with my mascara running and my nose all red."

She points to an adage in show business: "If you don't cry, your audience will."

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