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# THE REVOLUTION WILL BE HILARIOUS

COMEDY FOR  
SOCIAL CHANGE AND  
CIVIC POWER



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*Comedy for Social Change and Civic Power*

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## “I’ve Always Been a Syringe-Half-Full Kinda Guy”

### *Changing the Entertainment Comedy Pipeline*

Comedian Murf Meyer goes for the pathos right away, but he doesn’t stay there long enough to wallow: “Hey-eyyyy, I’m Murf! I’m a former heroin addict and current alcoholic.... I come from a big family. My mom’s one of nine kids, my dad’s one of eight. So I’ve got a lot of aunts and uncles, a shit-ton of cousins, and I’d say half of us are functioning alcoholics. Now, the other half are also alcoholics, buuuu-ut, they don’t function too good.”<sup>1</sup>

To hear him tell it, in a raspy smoker’s growl laced with bemused sing-song cadence, “damn near thirty years” of addiction is practically inevitable if the lottery of your birth plops you in the middle of Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. It is the stuff of American working-class boom-to-bust struggle, the kind of place where presidential hopefuls literally roll up their sleeves every four years (for TV cameras, of course) to prove their humanity by visiting so-called hard-working Americans in diners and hardware stores. Generations of Pennsylvania coal miners bequeathed to their kin storytelling chops while, according to Murf, they tried to “drown that black lung” and wash the coal dust down with a shot of whiskey and a beer at Nana McDonough’s bar (“Whaddya gonna use, water? Nah, you gotta get a little nip.”).

His birthplace is the unhappiest region of the United States, says a 2014 study.<sup>2</sup> Murf thinks those smug nerds could have saved their research money (and did they have to call it the “Unhappy Cities” report?), but then again, they have a point even though they missed the full story:

Why the long face? Weh-e-ell, first the coal mines dried up, then came the catastrophic natural disaster, plus our local economy’s not worth a dog’s

dick, and we’ve been plagued with rampant political corruption.... Also, for decades, we’ve been haunted with longstanding reports of child sexual abuse from the Catholic Church. Anyhow, four generations of all that—turns out that’s kind of a bummer. Sooo, well done, you Harvard hot shots. Looks like your analysis on us sad sacks checks out.... I reckon that’s why booze and drugs have always been pillars of our community.<sup>3</sup>

These days, hopelessness in places like northeastern Pennsylvania is such a rote media narrative that the stories seem to write themselves (and probably do, considering the local-news death spiral) through a repetitive template of unemployment, prescription pills, heroin, overdoses, meth labs, tragedy. Addiction- and poverty-porn headlines are steady, unrelenting, expected. Drug-related deaths are driving up the cost of morgues and cremations, even while arrests for drug possession climb higher—“and we all know that worked well in the past,” says Murf.<sup>4</sup> There is no end in sight. If you ask Murf, this is all pretty exhausting. And victim-blaming messages about addiction are downright hilarious considering the obscenity of big pharma’s bloated opioid-crisis profits in a place that needs economic opportunity more than it ever needed prisons or overprescribed pills.<sup>5</sup> Maybe the big cultural story is the wrong one. Maybe the punchline and the villains are backwards. Is there a new way to look at things—to cut through the daily diet of shame and stigma to give a guy like Murf a little hope?

Enter comedy.

Murf Meyer took a winding road to a professional comedy career. He worked as a bartender, security guard, psychiatric hospital orderly, pharmaceutical delivery driver, and, he adds, for “a telemarketer that was a money-laundering front, and a laundromat chain that was a front for a phone-sex business.”<sup>6</sup> None of those jobs, he points out, required his attention more than the occupation of “full-time IV heroin user” in his late teens and early twenties: “I’ll tell you what, *that* was the hardest goddamn job I ever had. I mean, you’re on call 24/7. Whenever you’re not shooting up, you’re busy doing prep work, like haggling with someone at a pawn shop or doing maintenance work on the one dull syringe you got left.... It’s an exhausting job with shitty benefits.”<sup>7</sup> The comedy part, though? Not entirely unexpected. His kindergarten teacher, notes

his mom, Jane, said he “show[ed] more interest in being the center of attention than his schoolwork.”<sup>8</sup> He sat out the Pledge of Allegiance, a display of “oppositional defiance” (according to his fifth-grade report card) that checks out for a self-described “guy with an anti-authoritarian streak” who sees the humor, absurdity, and hypocrisy in institutions of power that could use a little tweaking.

Murf found his village and his calling in improv comedy classes at New York’s Upright Citizens Brigade Theater, where he met comedian Chris Gethard, a fellow traveler playing on the edges of weird and funny—and, like Murf, working to stay one step ahead of anxiety and depression. As a mustachioed, hypervolume monologuing announcer dressed in a 1970s-era suit, Murf became a long-running cast member of the quirky cult classic comedy program, *The Chris Gethard Show*, which aired first on a New York public access channel and then on cable networks Fusion and truTV for a combined seven years, from 2011 to 2018.<sup>9</sup> Beloved by comedy luminaries and a fiercely devoted fan base, the show landed him a talent agent, a creative community of quirky and boundary-pushing comedians, and an opportunity to experiment with his own comedic voice. Keeping his head above water—treading through cycles of self-medicating and shame—had occupied some part of his brain since his first sip of booze at eleven and his first joint at thirteen. Comedy offered a way to find a laugh and cope.

The Gethard show came to a close as Murf began workshopping a comedic platform to share his story of self-medicating, mental health, and coming to terms with being sexually assaulted when he was eleven years old. Sure, maybe it was heady stuff for humor, but there was no shortage of material, he thought. He tried out jokes and storytelling on stages around New York. He took notes on what worked, learned from the bombs, and found new places for laughs. In 2019, he heard about our new initiative, which invited comedians to develop and pitch their best material that could break open real human space to talk about social issues—comedy that went to the heart of ignored lived experiences and urged its makers to creatively talk about hilarious, dark, marginalized stories and taboo or polarizing topics that are too often unseen in the entertainment marketplace. Drug addiction, stigma, and childhood

sexual trauma? Perfect. He pulled together an application packet and applied to our Yes, And ... Laughter Lab (affectionately known as YALL, an acronym that’s both gender inclusive and a fun double entendre or dumb dad joke, depending on how you see it). A few months later, the news arrived: he was a finalist and then a winner—one of six projects out of nearly four hundred—in YALL’s pilot year. His live comedy show idea, *Murf Meyer Is Self-Medicating*, had a place to build and possibly find a home with an audience.

And so it was that Murf Meyer found himself on a dusty basement comedy stage in New York’s Lower East Side in the summer of 2019, pitching his project and telling his story to a carefully assembled audience of fellow funny people, entertainment industry executives—and, for the first time in a room like this one, leaders of major foundations and social-justice and humanitarian organizations. *Murf Meyer Is Self-Medicating* was a hit. Hushed reverence hovered over the painful bits, and well-earned laughter came when his careful timing brought the audience back into the safe place of comedy just when it felt too dark to giggle. After all, he reminded us, “I’ve always been a syringe-half-full kinda guy.”

Things moved simultaneously quickly and slowly after Murf’s pitch presentation at YALL, as entertainment projects tend to go. A flurry of TV network meetings followed. Production companies wanted to meet and talk about the project: could it be a TV show *and* a live show? What was possible? As Murf recalled, the usual entertainment path certainly opened up, but it fell a little short: “There were a million meetings. And we spent some time in LA pitching different stuff at different levels of the development ladder and whatnot. But there are always a lot of snakes in the grass in that process ... and on this topic [in the entertainment industry], there’s some fetishizing.” And then, a new twist to what might have been a classic entertainment industry story: executives from the global Open Society Foundations (OSF), a long-running philanthropic funder for mental health and addiction who had watched Murf’s pitch in the room, took notice immediately. Comedy about self-medicating, intentionally designed by a former heroin user to address stigma and provide hope to people who needed it? They had never seen

or imagined anything like it. Comedy was not something they had ever considered, but Murf's story and funny delivery of hard truths was compelling and evocative. The foundation gave *Murf Meyer Is Self-Medicating* a sizable grant—the first for Murf, and a very notable comedy first for OSF.

With his new foundation funding, Murf got to work creating the show. He honed the sharp bits of comedy and dedicated himself to learning more about the harm-reduction movement, a growing body of science and practice in addiction treatment that takes its cues from historical movements for oppressed peoples, like the women's movement and the Black Panthers—social-change efforts Murf calls “grassroots mutual aid work.” After years of battling stigma that made his own addiction harder to confront, finding a community of people pushing for safety over abstinence, care over shame, was a revelation: “When people are kind of shoved aside and pushed into the shadows, they still take care of each other, and I think that's the one big thing even for addicts.” Comedy is new for the harm-reduction movement, just as it is for the philanthropic sector that supports it. They are learning from each other, says Murf: “The harm-reduction folks are like, oh, so there's a clown at the party now. All right. Let's see what his deal is.”

In March 2021, *Murf Meyer Is Self-Medicating* launched first as a podcast, the first leg in a longer entertainment journey that is building to become a live comedy tour of treatment and recovery facilities and communities across the country—and maybe TV in the future. In his entertaining, intimate, comedic storytelling style, Murf takes listeners deep into his own story while he interrogates the injustice and scandal of the opioid crisis and interviews a cross-section of people like harm-reduction experts, drug users, people in recovery, former police officers, and even his mom. It is stand-up comedy meets *This American Life* meets *The Moth* story hour, weaving in snark and sarcasm with revelatory moments and discoveries, story by story. His is an anti-stigma look at addiction and mental health, science and access to treatment, and the underlying roots and effects of trauma.

Comedy is desperately needed in this topic, if you ask Murf, to “normalize” the very human path from mental health trauma to self-med-

icating. Humor can also take away the shame and victim blaming that keep addiction in the shadows: “People just don't want to be talked at. ... In the drug issue, there's a power dynamic going on here and there's people hoarding resources and they're exploiting the rest of us. It is that simple at the end of the day. I feel like you've just got to find the humor in that to keep people's interest.”<sup>10</sup> As he says on the podcast's first episode after rattling off the names of the thirty-plus substances in his past, rapid-fire as in the style of pharmaceutical-advertisement side-effects disclaimers, “To be clear, I'm not glorifying any of those drugs. I'm also not stigmatizing them. They're just chemical substances, and people who use them are just human beings, so there's really no need for outside judgment in any direction.”<sup>11</sup>



Figure 7.1: Comedian Murf Meyer stands in front of a hometown (Luzerne County, Pennsylvania) billboard for his comedy podcast, *Murf Meyer Is Self-Medicating*

Audiences love it. On a regular basis, Murf hears from addiction counselors and people struggling with their own trauma, self-medicating. He is offering, after all, a fresh and funny and very open take on pain and internal shame, and they see themselves in his story. The laughs create a different space for reflection than finger-shaking victim blaming or guilt. For Murf, the project has even opened up a conversation in his own family—hard to imagine without comedy as the mental cushion and soft landing place, he says. He recalls the response from his father, who witnessed the darkest years of his teen addiction:

When I showed my dad the Laughter Lab video of my presentation, we watched it together in my living room. He was like “OK,” and then he kind of left the room. And then he came back, though, and he was just like, “Listen, I don’t know if I’m ever going to watch any of this or listen to this. But I know why you’re doing it and it’s to help people and I love you and I support you.” And he hugged me and we had a quick cry. It’s the first time I’ve seen him cry in decades.

Is this the standard process for developing and launching a comedy project to reach wide audiences? No, at least not in the usual way entertainment is developed, produced, and distributed in the Hollywood pipeline. And that is precisely the point. These are questions and challenges posed and interrogated throughout these pages, and here is where it all comes together in some ways. If we agree—hopefully in part on the basis of the evidence shared in this book—that comedy is a powerful force for social change through which to open up space for cultural reflection about people and ideas and lived experiences, then we might also find it provocative to imagine how to change the cultural pipeline for humor work that brings marginalized voices and social topics to the fore. Opening up different creative avenues for comedians to develop their unique visions is part of that aim. This is the story of the Yes, And ... Laughter Lab,<sup>12</sup> and the final stop in our journey.

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