



DeGeneres, Ellen (b. 1958)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Comic Ellen DeGeneres' act is characterized by slapstick zaniness, split second timing, and rambling monologues delivered with a hapless charm that invites audience identification. However, no matter how great her contribution to the world of comedy, DeGeneres will probably be best remembered as the first lesbian to star as a lesbian on her own network television series.

Born on January 26, 1958 into a middle-class family in Metairie, Louisiana, DeGeneres grew up riding her bicycle through the streets of New Orleans, a city that prides itself on a diverse and quirky population. Although the family moved to Texas for several years, DeGeneres, after dropping out of college in the mid-1970s, returned to New Orleans to follow her own unconventional path.

She worked a series of jobs, from oyster shucker to housepainter, before stumbling into comedy. Her first stand-up act was performed at an informal show at a friend's party. DeGeneres came on stage with a burger and fries and proceeded to eat as she talked, forcing the audience to wait as she chewed between lines. In this first show, she not only entertained her friends, but she began to create the bumbling everywoman character who would later convulse audiences across the country.

DeGeneres began to perform stand-up in coffeehouses and comedy clubs in New Orleans, then around the country as she developed her act. In 1982, she won a cable television contest for "Funniest Person in America," and soon she had her own cable specials and guest spots on shows such as *The Tonight Show* and *Arsenio Hall*. In the early 1990s, she made the most of supporting roles in the short-lived ABC sitcom *Laurie Hill* and the Fox network's *Open House*. She also won the American Comedy Award for "Best Female Standup."

In 1994, ABC offered DeGeneres her own sitcom, a *Seinfeld/Friends* clone, titled *These Friends of Mine*. The show was fairly successful, and the next season the network changed the title to *Ellen*.

DeGeneres had realized that she was a lesbian while still a teenager, and by the time she was in her twenties, she was living a fully, if closeted, lesbian life. As her career and her public recognition grew, so did the chasm between her public and private lives. As her sitcom approached its third season, DeGeneres made the decision not only to come out as a lesbian performer, but also to bring out the other Ellen, her sitcom alter-ego.

The decision would have a huge impact on DeGeneres' life and career, and also on anyone exposed to the barrage of media coverage. The coming out of the actress and her character led to an international discussion of the presence of gay men and lesbians in prime-time television.

On April 30, 1997, Ellen Morgan, heroine of *Ellen*, came out as a lesbian in a highly touted hour-long special episode. The show was one of the highest rated television shows ever, attracting 36.2 million viewers and winning an Emmy Award for writing. DeGeneres' success was short-lived, however. ABC canceled *Ellen* at



Ellen DeGeneres at Outfest, a Los Angeles film festival, in 2003. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Courtesy Angela Brinskele.

the end of the season, citing the poor quality of the shows and declining ratings.

An angry and disappointed DeGeneres blamed lack of network support for her show's failure. She felt especially betrayed by a parental advisory warning that the network placed on the shows with gay content.

The coming-out episode of *Ellen* received intense scrutiny from both the gay and mainstream press. Conservatives were, predictably, horrified; and, while many gays have hailed DeGeneres as a courageous pioneer, others have criticized her for not being political or radical enough. The media blitz surrounding her coming out affected DeGeneres' family as well. Her mother supported her by becoming an outspoken advocate of gay rights.

Shortly after the coming out episode, DeGeneres became romantically involved with (previously heterosexual) actress Anne Heche. Their relationship was constantly monitored by the press, who criticized them for such blatancy as public displays of affection at a White House function. Heche and DeGeneres dissolved their relationship at the end of 1999.

DeGeneres continues to work on network television. She had a recurrent role in the 1998 season of *Mad About You*, and she starred in another sitcom for CBS in 2001-2002. She has also appeared on cable (in Part 3 of HBO's *If These Walls Could Talk*) and in feature films (*Edtv* and *Goodbye Lover* in 1999). She has also gone back on the road as a stand-up comic, which resulted in another HBO comedy special, and she was invited to host the Academy Awards.

In 2003, DeGeneres began hosting a syndicated talk show. Offering a mix of celebrity interviews, musical performances, "real people" segments, and audience participation games, as well as a daily monologue by DeGeneres, the show quickly earned critical praise and solid ratings. In 2004, it won a daytime Emmy award for "Outstanding Talk Show."

The talk show, in fact, developed into a megahit. In 2008, DeGeneres won her fourth straight Emmy for the show.

Thus, despite the failure of her sitcoms, Ellen DeGeneres has bounced back in a spectacular fashion. She is now one of the most beloved television personalities in the United States. Rather than harming her career, her highly publicized coming out seems only to have increased her celebrity.

After the highly publicized dissolution of her relationship with Heche, DeGeneres embarked on a much less publicized relationship with photographer Alexandra Hedison, with whom she was together for almost four years. Ironically, soon after the December 2004 publication of an *Advocate* cover story on DeGeneres that featured photographs by Hedison, the two decided to end their relationship.

Following the break with Hedison, DeGeneres became involved with actress Portia de Rossi.

When the California Supreme Court overturned laws barring same-sex marriage in the state in May of 2008, DeGeneres and de Rossi announced that they would wed in the summer.

In an intimate ceremony, attended by only 19 guests, DeGeneres and de Rossi were married at their Beverly Hills home on August 16, 2008. The wedding was attended by both their mothers.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.