



A publicity photograph of Carol Leifer created by Harry Langdon.
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Leifer, Carol (b. 1956)

by Linda Rapp

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Carol Leifer worked hard to achieve success as a stand-up comedian, writer, actor, and producer. She never anticipated that after the age of forty she would find personal fulfillment by recognizing her lesbianism, becoming a mother, and standing up for glbtq rights.

Humor has been an integral part of life for Carol Leifer from her earliest days. She grew up in East Williston, New York, the city of her birth on July 27, 1956, listening to her father's trove of jokes. In her memoir, *When You Lie About Your Age, the Terrorists Win* (2009), she observes that "he was the reason I wanted to be a comedian and a comedy writer."

Dr. Seymour Leifer was, however, an optometrist, and so, as his daughter stated in a 1988 interview in *People* magazine, she initially believed that "comedy wasn't something you could really do for a living."

As a child, Leifer put on shows for family and friends in her basement, and by the time that she was ready for college, she had come around to seeing entertainment as a possible career.

Leifer enrolled in the theater program at the State University of New York at Binghamton, where she dated Paul Reiser, who would also go on to success in acting and comedy. After watching Reiser perform on open mic night at the Catch A Rising Star comedy club in New York, Leifer, then a college sophomore, developed her own routine and also took the stage. The audience loved her, and she loved being there.

In order to have greater access to the clubs of New York, Leifer left Binghamton in 1977 and transferred to Queens College to complete her senior year. After graduating, she continued to work in New York clubs, including the Comic Strip.

The MC on the night of Leifer's audition at the Comic Strip was Jerry Seinfeld, who became and remains an admirer of her talent. The two eventually dated briefly before settling back into a supportive platonic relationship.

David Letterman was in the audience for one of Leifer's performances at the Comic Strip in 1979, and he immediately recommended her to the talent coordinator of the *Tonight Show*. That did not result in an appearance, but when Letterman became the host of his own late-night show in 1982, he remembered Leifer and has since booked her as a guest more than two dozen times.

From the beginning of her career, Leifer's stand-up routines have been based on events in her own life, including especially her family relationships and encounters with others.

In the early 1980s Leifer made two important changes in her life: she married a comedian named Ritch Shydner in 1981, and she moved to California to pursue a career in television.

The marriage did not last for long. The couple separated in 1985 and divorced two years later.

Leifer's budding television career, on the other hand, was crowned with success. In addition to making appearances doing stand-up routines, she has worked as a writer, an actor, and a producer.

Leifer first wrote for the irreverent comedy show *Saturday Night Live* in the 1985-86 season and was later invited by Seinfeld to write for his self-titled situation comedy series (1993-1996).

Leifer's employment as a writer on *Seinfeld* was particularly appropriate since she was the inspiration for one of the principal characters in the show, Elaine Benes. In addition to writing for *Seinfeld*, she appeared in bit parts on several occasions and produced twenty-two episodes of the show.

Leifer shared an Emmy Award nomination with other writers and producers of *Seinfeld* for Outstanding Comedy Series in 1996.

The following year Leifer earned another Emmy nomination as both a writer and producer for *The Larry Sanders Show*.

Leifer combined her writing, acting, and producing talents to launch a situation comedy, *Alright Already* (1997-98), on the WB network. She starred as an optometrist—an homage to her father—coping with older parents and difficult siblings while trying to have a romantic life of her own.

Leifer told Rick Lyman of the *New York Times* that she had "seen too many comics who got their own shows and were undone because they worked for an executive producer who didn't understand their comedy or their sensibility" or who were proficient performers but lacked knowledge about production. Given her experience in both areas, she stated, "I really felt that I had the lay of sitcom land, and it was time for me to try to attempt to do my own show."

Alright Already was well received by critics but suffered from shuffling of time-slots and weak lead-in shows. It was dropped by the network after only one season.

Leifer was also a force behind *The Ellen Show* (2001-02), serving as both writer and executive producer of the short-lived second vehicle for Ellen DeGeneres, who had courageously come out during the run of her previous series.

Leifer has written and produced episodes of numerous other series and also provided material for the Academy Awards shows in 2004, 2005, and 2007.

She is also a writer and co-executive producer of the CBS sitcom *Rules of Engagement*, which debuted in 2007 and was recently renewed for a fifth season. In addition, she has continued to make guest appearances doing comedy on various shows.

Leifer had a life-changing experience when, at the age of forty, she met and was attracted to Lori Wolf, a realtor. "I did go into [the relationship] thinking this would be a fun fling and a great story and brief," she stated to Rachel Dowd of *The Advocate*. "The last thing I expected was to fall in love with this person," she said, but that is what happened.

Shortly thereafter, Leifer had a serious health scare when a mammogram revealed a potentially cancerous tumor. Although the growth was determined to be benign, it needed to be removed, and Leifer went back home to New York for the surgery, accompanied by Wolf, whom she introduced to her family as a friend lending support.

It was some months before Leifer came out to her parents. "The agony was feeling that being gay would disappoint them," she told Dowd, but in the event, they were entirely supportive. Leifer recalled her mother's words: "Finding love is a gift from God. There should be tears of joy here."

Leifer felt that it was helpful that Wolf—unlike her ex-husband Shydner—was Jewish. "Add a thousand points," she quipped to Dowd.

Neither woman was particularly observant of religion at that time. Leifer had rarely attended temple in her youth. Her father, who had been brought up and educated in an extremely strict Orthodox manner, had fallen away from the practice of religion, "and yet," wrote Leifer, "if I was asked for one word to describe my father, it would be 'Jewish.' Somehow the joy of his faith still shone through."

Both Leifer and Wolf decided to commit to Judaism by being bat mitzvahed, an event that usually takes place when girls are thirteen. Leifer was forty-seven.

Leifer's beloved father died just three weeks before the bat mitzvah, but at the ceremony Leifer wore the tallis, a prayer shawl, that he had worn at his own bar mitzvah in 1930, and, she wrote, "it felt like his hands on my shoulders."

In 2007 Leifer and Wolf added to their family by adopting a ten-month-old Latino boy. They retained his given name at birth, Bruno, but at his brit chayim, the naming ceremony for a Jewish child, they honored the larger family of which he had become a part by calling him Shmuel Chaim Baruch, incorporating the Hebrew names of Leifer's father and Wolf's grandfather, respectively, along with the word meaning blessing.

While the Leifer and Wolf household had previously included only two persons, there were numerous other inhabitants. Prior to becoming partners with Wolf, Leifer had never had a pet, but their life as a couple began with two cats and a dog. Since then, the menagerie has changed and grown to as many as seven dogs, and Leifer, initially hesitant to have furry companions, has become their devoted champion. She and Wolf have brought many—especially older animals with lower chances of being adopted—into their home, and Leifer makes frequent appearances at benefits for animal charities.

When Leifer took part in the *Celebrity Apprentice* show (2010), she was eliminated early on but refused to go without a ten thousand dollar check from Donald Trump for the organization that she was representing, the North Shore Animal League, a no-kill shelter.

In a 2007 auction to benefit the Humane Society, Leifer bid successfully for the apology letter written by professional football player Michael Vick after his conviction for animal abuse involving dog-fighting. Her contribution of over ten thousand dollars was generous, but, she told Richard Freedman of the Benicia Vallejo Humane Society, she has plans to extract even greater good from the document. "I fully plan to put it up for auction again and give all the money raised to the Humane Society," she declared.

Leifer has become an activist for glbtq rights as well. Both she and Wolf campaigned vigorously against California's 2008 Proposition 8, which rescinded the right to marriage equality, and they were, she stated to Danielle Cantor of *Jewish Woman* magazine, "devastated by the result."

"We'd definitely like to be married," she added, "but we're real hold-outs—we'd like to wait until it's legal on a federal level."

Meanwhile, Leifer and Wolf continue to nurture their child, practice their faith, succeed in their careers, devote themselves to charitable work for animal welfare, and work for equality for glbtq people.

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