



O'Donnell, Rosie (b. 1962)

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

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Comedian, actress, television talk show host, and now openly gay mom, Rosie O'Donnell has achieved monumental success in her relatively brief career. Long rumored to be lesbian, she publicly came out in March 2002 in a much-publicized interview with Diane Sawyer on *Primetime Thursday*.

The host of *The Rosie O'Donnell Show* from 1996 to 2002, O'Donnell built a loyal following among viewers of daytime television, including many mainstream Americans. Debuting with the largest ratings of any talk show in a decade, *The Rosie O'Donnell Show* was a phenomenal success and made its host a genuine star. O'Donnell and her show were the recipients of numerous Emmy Awards.

To her chagrin, early in her talk show career, *Newsweek* responded to her homespun humor by dubbing her "The Queen of Nice." Actually, however, her "niceness"--which is often communicated through Broadway show tunes--is an important key to her likeability and to her success in rescuing television talk shows from the shock and shlock in which many of her predecessors and competitors were mired. O'Donnell returned civility and fun to a genre that had become dominated by "trash TV."

For all her sentimentality and civility, however, O'Donnell has emerged as one of the most vocal, outspokenly liberal celebrities of the past decade. Devoted to figures such as Hillary Clinton and Barbra Streisand, she has brought before her audiences political discussions on topics as various as gun control, welfare reform, and Rudolph Giuliani. The cause she most passionately espouses is child advocacy.

Interest in the lives of foster children in Florida prompted her decision to come out. Learning of the plight of Steve Lofton and Roger Croteau, a gay couple unable to adopt a foster child in that state, despite having raised him from infancy when no one else would foster him, O'Donnell decided it was time the public added her face to their mental images of gay parents. As she told Diane Sawyer in March, "I don't think America knows what a gay parent looks like: I am a gay parent."

Cynics wondered if O'Donnell's timing depended on the scheduled end of her show in May 2002, and if her high-profile coming-out was part of the promotional effort of her new book *Find Me* (2002), but she maintained that she needed a specific political reason to disclose her sexual orientation publicly.

The staggering number of foster children in the United States motivated her to protest the state law barring gay and lesbian parents from adopting them. "I don't think," she said to Sawyer, "that restricting the pool of adoptive parents is beneficial."

O'Donnell's interest in children's welfare and her desire to provide a loving home for her own children stem from her own difficult childhood. The third of five children, she was born on March 21, 1962 to Edward and Roseann O'Donnell. She grew up in Commack, New York, on Long Island.

At the age of ten, O'Donnell lost her mother to cancer, although she did not learn of the cause of her



Rosie O'Donnell presenting an art piece at Lambda Legal's fundraising auction in 2003. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Courtesy Angela Brinskele. © Angela Brinskele.

mother's death until she was sixteen. She has described the period after her mother's death as extremely difficult and her father as having emotionally abandoned his five children. Out of her sense of loss evolved a fierce desire to create her own loving family, regardless of her sexual orientation.

O'Donnell also credits her difficult childhood in part for her interest in the entertainment industry. In high school, she masked her unhappiness with humor. She was not only homecoming queen, prom queen, and senior class president, but also class clown. She attended college briefly after high school (at Dickinson College and Boston University), but soon left to begin working comedy clubs.

In the mid-1980s, after winning comedy champion five times on *Star Search*, she hosted and produced *Stand-Up Spotlight* on VH-1. The secret to her success as a comedian was her ability to relate to other people and to project an empathetic, non-threatening persona, the same qualities that made her a successful talk show host.

In the early 1990s she landed her first film roles in *A League of Their Own* (1992) and *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), in which she became known for playing the no-nonsense best friend to the female star. Other films include *Another Stakeout* (1993), *The Flintstones* (1994), *Exit to Eden* (1994), and *Harriet the Spy* (1996).

She has also appeared on Broadway in a revival of *Grease* (1995), among other productions. Her support for Broadway manifests itself not only in her vast store of Broadway tunes, but also in hosting the Tony Awards. Among her television acting appearances have been guest spots on *Stand by Your Man* and *Will and Grace*.

In 1995 she adopted her first child, son Parker Jaren, and soon after she decided to stop working in films and host her own television show to allow her to spend more time with him. In 1997, she adopted a daughter, Chelsea Belle, and in 1999, another son, Blake Christopher.

In 1998, O'Donnell and former Nickelodeon executive Kelli Carpenter became partners. On November 29, 2002, Carpenter gave birth to the couple's fourth child, Vivienne Rose O'Donnell. O'Donnell and Carpenter were married in San Francisco on February 26, 2004, during the brief period that Mayor Gavin Newsom permitted same-sex marriages in the city. Their marriage was subsequently nullified by the California Supreme Court.

In addition to raising her children and hosting her television show, O'Donnell has established her own charity organization, called For All Kids Foundation, and launched her own magazine, *Rosie*.

In a flurry of charges and countercharges, O'Donnell ended her association with the magazine in mid-2002. The departure led to a suit and countersuit between O'Donnell and publisher Gunner + Jahr. The bitter legal dispute ended in November 2003, with a judge's ruling that neither party deserved damages.

In 2003, O'Donnell produced *Taboo*, a musical about the life of Leigh Bowery, with music by Boy George. The show opened to tepid reviews, but ran for some 100 performances on Broadway.

Among O'Donnell's many other projects is her participation, with Carpenter and travel industry veteran Gregg Kaminsky, in R Family Vacations, a company that arranges family vacations for the glbtq community.

In 2006, O'Donnell accepted an invitation to serve as moderator of the television talk show *The View*. Her presence immediately boosted ratings, but she became a lightning rod for controversy, especially because of her strong opinions about the Bush administration's policies in Iraq. She left the show after a few months.

In 2007, she released a second memoir, *Celebrity Detox*, in which she discusses her time at *The View* and her struggle with fame.

In 2008, O'Donnell produced and starred in a Lifetime Television movie entitled *America*, in which she played a therapist to a teenager in the foster care system.

In 2009, she inaugurated *Rosie Radio*, a two-hour daily program on Sirius XM Radio.

Also in 2009, O'Donnell announced that she and Carpenter had separated. She was subsequently linked with artist Tracy Kachtik-Anders, but the couple never lived together and the relationship ended in 2011.

In 2011, O'Donnell signed on with OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network to return to daytime TV with another talk show, *The Rosie Show*. On March 16, 2012, the OWN Network cancelled the show due to low ratings. The final episode aired on March 29, 2012.

O'Donnell began dating Michelle Rounds, an executive-search consultant, in summer 2011. On December 5, 2011, during a break in the taping of *The Rosie Show*, O'Donnell announced to her studio audience that she and Rounds were engaged. The couple married in a private ceremony in New York on June 9, 2012.

In August 2012, O'Donnell suffered a heart attack. She says she saved her life by taking an aspirin and going to a hospital, where it was determined that an artery was 99 percent blocked and a stent was inserted.

O'Donnell is a notably generous philanthropist, rumored to have given away as much as 100 million dollars, primarily to child advocacy organizations, foundations, and projects.

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Geoffrey W. Bateman is the Assistant Director for the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a research center based at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that promotes the study of gays and lesbians in the military. He is co-editor of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Debating the Gay Ban in the Military*, as well as author of a study on gay personnel and multinational units. He earned his M.A. in English literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in eighteenth-century British literature and theories of genders and sexuality, but now lives in Denver, Colorado, where he is co-parenting two sons with his partner and a lesbian couple.