



## Westenhoefter, Suzanne (b. 1961)

by Linda Rapp

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Out, proud, pretty, and funny, Suzanne Westenhoefter has found success as a stand-up comedian and actress. She is also an outspoken supporter of glbtq and feminist causes.

The youngest of three sisters, Westenhoefter was born March 31, 1961 in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. When the girls ranged in age from six to two, their father abandoned them and their mother. Their situation was highly unusual for the time and place; Westenhoefter recalled that "there were no other divorced families in the entire town" back in the 1960s. Perhaps partly because of that, the mother and her daughters are all "very, very bonded" to each other.

Westenhoefter's mother is proud of both Suzanne and middle sister Joan, who is also a lesbian activist. Upon meeting other parents of glbtq children, she has been known to quip, "You have only one?"

Westenhoefter's oldest sister, a born-again Pentecostal, has dire predictions for her siblings in the afterlife. Nevertheless, everyone manages to get along. "We love each other, and we're never not going to be friends," said Westenhoefter of her family.

But the relationship at the center of Westenhoefter's life--and many of her routines--is with the woman who has been her partner since the early 1990s, Jennifer Houston.

### Education

After high school, Westenhoefter enrolled at Clarion University in Clarion, Pennsylvania. While there, she helped found the college's first gay and lesbian group.

After earning her degree in drama, she moved to New York City in hopes of beginning an acting career. She continued her involvement in glbtq causes by marching with ACT UP and later with Queer Nation after that group split off from the former.

### Stand-up Comedian

Westenhoefter started her stand-up career with a three-minute routine at a piano bar in 1990. She proved to be a natural, and some friends urged her to enter a stand-up contest at a West Village cabaret. She won the competition and began getting bookings at other New York clubs.

Westenhoefter came to wider attention when she appeared on a January 1991 episode of Sally Jesse Raphael's talk show with the curious title "Lesbians Who Don't Look Like Lesbians." The tall, blond, and beautiful Westenhoefter evidently did not match whatever stereotypical image the producers had.

Westenhoefter did not perform a routine on the show, but the fact that she was identified as a stand-up



Suzanne Westenhoefter in 2004. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Courtesy Angela Brinskele. © Angela Brinskele.

comedian drew interest and inquiries that led to more bookings and opportunities to tour.

An immediate hit with queer audiences, Westenhofer also sought to reach out to the mainstream public. "I want to talk to straight people. I want to dialogue with them. I want them to get over this stereotype stuff. I have a desperate need to convince each straight person that we're fine," she said, adding that from the beginning, "I've always enjoyed the responsibility of being, to some degree, a vocal person for the gay community. I take that on on purpose. It's a mission in my life."

She commented in 1997 that she found it encouraging that straight people in her audiences had a greater awareness of glbtq culture so that she did not "have to explain as much" about it as she did at the beginning of her career.

Westenhofer made her television debut when she was featured in *Out There*, a special filmed on National Coming Out Day, October 11, 1993. The next year she had the opportunity to do an episode of the *HBO Comedy Half-Hour* series and was rewarded with a Cable ACE Award for her performance.

### **Comedy Albums**

Westenhofer's first comedy album, *Nothing in My Closet But My Clothes*, was released in 1997. She found humor in her relationships--romantic, familial, and with pets--and in interviewing her sports idol, Martina Navratilova, for *The Advocate*, among other topics.

In an *Advocate* review, actress and screenwriter Guinevere Turner called Westenhofer "just as entertaining on non-queer subjects" as when discussing her experiences as a lesbian. Turner praised her "fierce" and exquisite timing and her wit. "She has an unnerving ability to make you think that she's going to say something really tasteless, but she stops just before she gets there and surprises you with something else entirely. It's classy and, most important, funny."

The album earned Westenhofer a Gay/Lesbian American Music Award (GLAMA) for comedy.

Westenhofer released her second CD, *I'm Not Cindy Brady*, in 2000. The title refers to the fact that some people seem to think that she was the child actress (actually Susan Olsen) who played the youngest daughter on the sitcom *The Brady Bunch*. The album brought her another GLAMA Award.

Westenhofer's next project was the independent feature film *A Family Affair* (2001, directed by Helen Lesnick). Although the film has a lesbian theme, Westenhofer, apparently still plagued by not looking enough like a lesbian, played a lesbian's straight sister.

The casting decision provided the grist for one of the pieces on her third comedy album, *Guaranteed Fresh* (2003). In his review of the disk, Bruce C. Steele commented on Westenhofer's appeal: "Her humor comes not from an off-kilter persona, elaborate set-ups, or shock value, but an understanding of the intense silliness of everyday life."

### **Television Appearances**

From early in her career, Westenhofer has had an impressive list of appearances on cable television, including stand-up performances on *Comedy Central*, *Evening at the Improv*, *Caroline's Comedy Hour*, *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, and *The Jon Stewart Show*, but network television was slow in recognizing her.

Her first appearance on network TV came in March 2003 when she was a guest on the *David Letterman*

*Show*. It was a first for *Letterman* as well: no out lesbian comic had been invited before, nor had any openly gay man.

The man in charge of booking comedians for *Letterman* had been trying for two years to convince executives to invite her on the show, and when the call finally came, she saw it as both an opportunity and a responsibility. "I felt the need to do *really* well because I was speaking--and hopefully opening doors--for lots of gay folks," she stated. "I was also scared because I am female. Watch TV; not too many chicks [are] getting the opportunity to do stand-up either."

Westenhoefler noted a bizarre parallel between the boosts to her career by her appearances on *Raphael* and *Letterman*: the former occurred the day before the start of the Gulf War, and the latter took place on the eve of the war with Iraq. "Two big milestones of my career, and a Bush goes into Iraq and attacks. There's something creepy about it."

Westenhoefler was one of four lesbian comedians--Kate Clinton, Marga Gómez, and Karen Williams were the others--profiled in Andrea Meyerson's 2004 film *Laughing Matters*. The documentary included interviews with the women as well as segments from their stage shows.

In 2006, Westenhoefler returned to cable television as a panelist on the Game Show Network's revival of *I've Got a Secret*, a long-running show of the 1950s and 1960s. Joining her on the all-gay panel of the new edition were radio host Frank DeCaro, actor and dancer Jermaine Taylor, and former major-league baseball player Billy Bean.

## **Activism**

Women's and glbtq rights are important causes to Westenhoefler. She is a strong supporter of Planned Parenthood. When she became pregnant at sixteen, she had an abortion and feels "extremely fortunate that the choice was available" so that she was able to escape the difficult situation of many girls in her hometown who were "pregnant at 16 or 17, married, [and] divorced by the time they [were] 20."

In retrospect, she also realizes that once she recognized her lesbianism, she would have met with societal disapproval and possibly have been declared an unfit mother, given the homophobic atmosphere of the time and place.

Westenhoefler is strongly committed to the glbtq community. She works numerous benefit appearances into her busy schedule of around one hundred concerts per year and exhorts other to do their part as well: "Host AIDS fundraisers, and breast cancer auctions, and drag queen contests, and drag king contests."

Entertainment critics have noted that Westenhoefler's language is relatively restrained compared to other queer performers such as Margaret Cho and Lea DeLaria. Westenhoefler acknowledges the difference in style, remarking, "I don't want to ever make my audience uncomfortable."

Although Westenhoefler is less aggressively political than some other comedians, she counts herself among "the sacred cow-busters." "Sometimes what comics do is we make jokes to get opinions across to people," she stated. "It's sneaky. We're getting you to see our opinions 'cause you're laughing and you've relaxed, and you don't even realize it."

Westenhoefler wed Jennifer Houston, a marketing executive, on September 9, 2008. The couple chose to set their wedding date before the November election, in which Proposition 8 would be on the ballot in California. Unfortunately, their caution was only too warranted, but because they married in advance of the election, their union is among the approximately 18,000 same-sex marriages legally recognized by the state.

The couple maintains homes in Columbus, Ohio, and Los Angeles, California.

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