

PROFILE **SUSIE ESSMAN**



You CAN'T Curb SUSIE ESSman / By Ruth Bashinsky

It was a packed house at Caroline's Comedy Club in Manhattan on a balmy spring night in May. Young people. Older people. Bald people. Tall people. Local people. Foreign people. All gathered in one room in anticipation of the evening's headliner: Susie Essman. The moment Essman walks out she instantly makes a connection with the audience. "I've been extremely hormonal and imbalanced all day ... who here is hormonal menopausal, too?" she asks.

Laughs break out and then there is a brief pause. Suddenly, an audience member starts coughing. "She has bronchitis," a friend of the cougher explains to Essman apologetically. Turning toward the cougher, Essman has an outburst. "Thank you for coming out and infecting the whole audience. What a selfish little b**** you are. I'm busy and I can't be getting sick right now ... I spend a good part of my day checking WebMD. It's like a hypochondriac's dream ... more and more I am becoming like my mother, becoming obsessed with disease. A fear and a wish all rolled into one."

For the last seven seasons, Essman has been playing Susie Greene, the feisty, loud-mouthed wife of Jeff Garlin from the hit HBO series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Essman's character is in constant angst due to the twisted situations Garlin and his best friend and client, Larry David, get themselves into. Essman has no problem screaming profanities at the top of her lungs, calling her husband, "A fat f****" or telling his best friend to "Go f**** yourself." Playing such a colorful character on HBO has been a dream job for Essman. "What other job could I possibly have where I can yell and scream and curse my head off and everyone loves me for it?" One of her favorite profanities, in fact, took place in "The Doll" episode in season two. "It is the first time we played

Spanish music and what is more beautiful than saying, "Get me the f****ing head!" she laughs.

Essman's sharp tongue and acerbic wit have been part of her shtick since she arrived on the comedy scene in the mid-1980s, appearing at bars such as Comedy U and Catch a Rising Star. Her no-nonsense approach to comedy – telling it like it is – has always been a favorite among male and female audiences. In 1995, Essman's success gained her entry into the Friars Club, an all-male venue that did not allow women to become members until 1988 (Liza Minnelli was the first official card-carrying female member). Essman was now part of a community of legendary comics and entertainers – Frank Sinatra, Lucille Ball, Ed Sullivan, Alan King, Henny Youngman, Red Buttons. In 1999, when doing *The Roast of Jerry Stiller* for Comedy Central, Larry David, who was casting for *Curb Your Enthusiasm* saw the show and offered her the role of Susie Greene. Essman, who had known David from their early days at Catch a Rising Star, accepted, having no idea what a phenomenon the show would be. "It's a dream job of a lifetime," says Essman, who calls Larry David a genius. "In seven seasons, Larry and I have never discussed who Susie Greene is. Not once. He instinctively got what I was doing and wrote my character into scenes, and I instinctively got what he wanted me to do."

In her new memoir, *What Would Susie Say? Bullsh*t Wisdom About Love, Life and Comedy*, Essman talks about her comedy, her childhood, her recent marriage, her children and *Curb*. She writes: "*Curb* put me on the map and gave me the public validation that helped crack the ceiling. Lots of people knew I was funny before I was on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, but it was Larry David who gave me the opportunity. I must say, no man has ever used me so well."

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The banter that goes on between Essman and her on-screen husband is entertaining and believable, but beyond the yelling and screaming, Essman assures us that her character really does love her husband. "She loves him ... she loves him. It is just one of these relationships – we've all seen them. One of those sado-masochistic love-hate attachments. She has her arrangement, like many marriages do. She likes her lifestyle. I think she is used to putting up with Jeff and believes that is what marriage is ... that is what her lot in life is. She does not really think beyond that."

Even so, Susie Greene has become a symbol of sisterhood and empowerment. "I've had women all across the country who have come up to me and told me that I'm their idol," says Essman. "I don't speak to my real husband that way. I just think it is a very interesting commentary on the state of marriage in this country." In fact, since season five, Susie Greene has had her own advice column that is featured on the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* website. "Real people wrote to Susie Greene with real problems, and she/I answered them on the website. She became the Ann Landers of Angry."

Despite the authenticity of her television persona, Essman explains that she and Greene are very different people. "I love Susie Greene. I love playing her, but I'm not her ... it's called acting," she says. "Susie Greene is much more reactive. She just kind of responds. She is completely secure in her opinions, ideas and her thoughts about everything. Susie Essman is much more analytical."

These days, Essman apparently can't walk down the street or go to the supermarket without someone shoving a cell phone in her face and begging her to call their spouse "a fat f***. Although she loves her fans, she admits that "... it is kind of annoying because it happens so often."

In June, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* became syndicated on the TV Guide Channel. *Curb* fans can now get their fix every Wednesday and Thursday night at 10 p.m. After the show, Essman hosts a panel discussion titled *Curb: The Discussion*, which revolves around the moral and ethical implications of Larry's behavior on the show. Jerry Seinfeld, Dr. Drew Pinsky and high-profile attorney Gloria Allred have all been guests. The only change Essman had to make was to curb her cursing. "I had to change all my f***s to freaks and the truth is, it doesn't really change the show because it's not the cursing that most people respond to in Susie Greene. They think it is the cursing but it is [really] her total and complete comfort with her anger. I think women are all brought up to be nice little girls and not to get angry and not to express their anger and I think that is unhealthy. I am not just a crazy screaming lunatic." When asked if every woman has a bit of Susie Greene in her, Essman replies, "I would hope so."

Essman's career is not the only area of her life that has come full circle – so has her personal life. In September, the actress will be celebrating her two-year wedding anniversary to Jim Harder, a commercial real estate broker she met in 2003. After years of being a single girl in the city with a dog, Essman became a wife

and a mother of four teenagers ranging in age from 16 to 22 – at age 53. In between filling out college applications, getting one daughter ready for camp and another an apartment, she has made the transition with ease and tries to look at the humor in things when life gets a bit overwhelming. "Some people have a burning biological desire to have kids. A lot of women have that ... I just never had that. Then all of a sudden, I just had these kids. I just walked in there and there was a void and I filled it. I am supermom at this point. You know how it is to have kids – there is stuff that needs to get done and you just have to do it."

Becoming a mother helped the comedian decide to write a book. "There were a lot of reasons I wrote the book, but one of the reasons was my daughters. There are things that they don't know about me that I can tell them, but it doesn't have the same impact as when they are reading it. There was wisdom I wanted to impart to them and things I wanted them to understand."

Born in the Bronx and raised in Mount Vernon, Essman knew early on that she had a gift to make people laugh. "I was always funny. I was always doing imitations of everybody. I was always a big mouth and would say things that no one else would say. I realized at a young age when you make people laugh, you get their attention in a positive way. There are people that need attention and go and shoot up a post office; that's not a good way to do it. I think if you can find an outlet to get the attention you need, that is positive reinforcement. I think that is good."

In her memoir, Essman talks about her grandmother, a woman she describes as "incredibly funny ... effortlessly funny," and a person who had a tremendous influence on her life. "She was an immigrant. She left school in the third grade. She worked in a factory her whole life. Her life was so limited by her circumstances. I think about the opportunities that I have been given that she didn't have. Even in the very end, when she was in a nursing home and she suffered from severe dementia ... she was still funny."

It was her grandmother who also saw the gift of humor that Essman possesses. "My grandmother was pivotal in this. She just laughed at everything I said. I think I got it at a very young age – probably not consciously, but unconsciously – when you make people laugh they like you. Luckily, I had the ability and that worked out for me."

Back at Caroline's Essman is still kibitzing with the crowd, providing insight on her unique Jewish roots and the characters that make up her family tree. "Everything my mother does is by coincidence," she says. "This is the type of person who wants special treatment." Essman explains that her mother is a person who is always preparing for the worst. "I think your father has Alzheimer's. I think your father has a brain tumor. I have the suicide instructions and I put a list together of everything I want to do." In 2001, when Essman's father passed away and people came to offer their condolences, her mother replied, "There was a side of him we didn't talk about." Essman lowers her head into the microphone "... so you wonder why I didn't marry until I was 53."