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Using Comedy to Save Health Care Careers: Laura Hayden's Journey

Announcer:

You're listening to Your Career In Health Care on Reach MD, the channel for medical professionals. Your host is Tim Rush, President and CEO of the HealthJobsNationwide.com network, featuring over 1.5 million health care jobs daily from over 60 thousand employers nationwide.

Tim Rush:

In this digital era it's interesting how we meet people. You can speak, and I use that term loosely, with someone across the world and not even leave your living room. My producer had the great fortune of meeting our next guest on Twitter. Her story was so interesting that within 24 hours we booked her as one of our guests. This is Your Career In Health Care on Reach MD, and I'm your host Tim Rush. Joining me today is Dr. Laura Hayden, a practicing physical therapist, touring comedian, and speaker. Dr. Hayden, welcome to Reach MD.

Dr. Laura Hayden:

Thank you.

Tim Rush:

It's exciting just to talk to you. I can hear the energy in your voice. You love what you do, and you love

to make people laugh. Let's start out with telling our listeners a little bit about your medical career first.

Dr. Laura Hayden:

My medical career came around the complete wrong way of going about it. I actually started out as an art major and then went into business, and then ended up in physical therapy because of a car accident. And then I was actually looking to go to medical school then got interested in physical therapy, so I had to go back and take all the classes because I didn't take a lot of science for business and art.

So then I ended up going back and getting my master's in physical therapy, and then at the same time I actually started doing comedy shortly thereafter. And comedy actually saved my physical therapy career, and so I actually went back and got my doctorate in physical therapy with my thesis dissertation being on the healing aspects of laughter as it pertains to caretaker stress and burnout, because comedy literally just saved my physical therapy career.

Tim Rush:

That's fantastic. It's funny, I have five kids. Something really interesting of late has happened. My oldest son who's 13, every time we get in the car, and this has only been going on for about six weeks now, but he wants to grab my iPhone and then he's looking up comedy routines on You Tube, and he's playing it over the Bluetooth of the car. So I just get to laugh with my 13-year-old, and it is so much fun. Along those lines, how did you end up as a comedian when you were in medicine?

Dr. Laura Hayden:

Well, I'll try to make a long, fascinating by the way, story as concise as possible. But because I went to school for ever, and ever, and ever, I actually waited tables for ever, and ever, and ever. And all my regular customers when I waited tables were, "Oh my gosh, you're so funny," and I'm, "Not funny, what do you want?" For my master's in physical therapy we had to give an enormous amount of presentations. Everybody in my class was always so excited about when I gave a presentation.

They're, "Oh, you're going to make it funny," and I'm, "I'm going to be talking about geriatric rehab" or spinal meningitis or something. "I'm not going to be funny." And they're, "Oh, you'll be funny somehow." And so because of this they nominated me to give the commencement speech. I was a good student, but I'm not commencement speech valedictorian level. So I was really honored and terrified, because I'm not a natural extravert. But it was such an honor I wanted to do it, so graduate school, several thousand people, this is an honor.

So I actually was so excited to do it, but I just really was trying not to be boring because as we all know commencement speeches are notoriously boring. We'd like to thank the faculty, blah, blah, blah. And

the whole time they're talking all you can think is, if you would stop talking we could have cake. We're only here for the cake. I over-exceeded my goal when I gave that speech. Afterwards people are, "Oh my gosh, you were hilarious," and I had to wait for people to physically stop laughing. And afterwards people are, "You're a natural. Oh my gosh, you should be on stage," blah, blah, blah.

And so I was, "Yeah whatever, I just went to school forever. I should probably get this whole career thing started." So a long story longer, every New Year's instead of pretending to give up something because I've never managed to stop eating, drinking, or swearing, every New Year's instead of giving up something I try something new. I've been doing this since my 20s. I flipped a coin 12 years ago, heads came up so I took a standup class. And I really expected just to do the showcase and prove to my friends and family I wasn't funny and move on with my life.

But apparently there's no 12-step program for comics. So I kept doing it. A magical thing happened because I was a new practitioner, and nobody teaches you about burnout in medical school. Maybe there's a few schools out there, but nowhere have I seen in medical, nursing, _____ (4:24), teaching, social workers, anybody, there's no training on how to deal with the life-sucking force that some people are going to take out of you. And I would leave work at 7:00 in the evening barely able to walk to my car because they've drained everything out of me emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically.

And I have this horrible Protestant work ethic so I would be, okay, I'm going to do this open mike because I said I'd be there. And at midnight because somebody made me laugh and I made somebody else laugh, I felt better at midnight than I felt at 7:00 in the evening. And it happened over, and over, and over again, and because I'm a studious nerdy type person I started studying the healing aspects of laughter, so it became like a pet project for me.

And then the opportunity from Boston University showed up to get my doctorate. _____ (5:09) have interest in this, but this is what I want to study. This is what I want to bring to the table. And they were, "That sounds good." So anyhow, that's how I ended up getting the doctorate with the dissertation on the healing aspects of laughter as it pertains to caretaker stress and burnout, because I really think that as caretakers of the world we don't spend enough time caring for ourselves.

Do no harm should start with us. So the magical thing happened, and it found me, and I found a way to protect myself and my career, and now I'm working on trying to get hopefully some information to help other people that are struggling with that, particularly new practitioners.

Tim Rush:

Wow. That's awesome. Literally my last interview was on career physician burnout, talking about the stresses of working as a caregiver. So you found a very special connection there with comedy. Were

you always funny?

Dr. Laura Hayden:

Oh God, no. Actually I am a huge introvert. I grew up as, if you think of the shyest person that you know of growing up, the person that would hide under the table. I actually had people in high school they're, "I didn't even know you talked." Now they find out I do comedy. I mean, they wanted to put me in therapy for how introverted shy I was growing up.

And actually that's a speech I'm planning for colleges about being an introvert and breaking out of that. I made a conscious decision to try to be able to break out of that, because being painfully shy is really a hard way to live your life. So no, I actually used to wish I was funny, because I was, oh, funny people have friends. But no, I wasn't until, I'm a late bloomer, that's all I can tell you.

Tim Rush:

What's the balance right now on working as physical therapist and the comedy? What's your balance professionally?

Dr. Laura Hayden:

I have two full-time jobs, that's my balance. I don't work full-time at any one clinic. I actually kind of work now as a substitute teacher, if you think of it that way, for physical therapists. I work at 11 different clinics, and I cover vacations, sick days, maternity leaves, jury duty, that sort of thing. I left my full-time position seven years ago so I could have a more flexible schedule to travel for comedy.

So if I'm in town I'm almost always at a clinic working, and if I'm in town at a clinic working I'm also usually doing a show that night. It's not uncommon for me to leave at like 6:30 in the morning and get home at midnight. I also have insomnia, and I'm a little bit of a maniac, that helps. And then I also go on the road, which I'm actually leaving to go to Italy next Wednesday for two weeks on a cruise ship. So if I'm in town I'm working, so it's almost 50/50, and I probably between the two of them work 60, 70-plus hours a week easily.

Tim Rush:

If you're just tuning in you're listening to Your Career In Health Care on Reach MD. I'm your host Tim Rush, and joining me today is Dr. Laura Hayden, practicing physical therapist and comedian. So does your medical career kind of work as the place where you find your content for your comedy?

Dr. Laura Hayden:

I find content everywhere, because there's funny things everywhere. I find a lot of stuff in the medical field, but obviously I can't talk about specific patients, so it's always more general. Silly things, I mean you just have to skew your head a little bit and there's funny everywhere.

Tim Rush:

What do your peers and colleagues think about the way you have woven comedy into your career?

Dr. Laura Hayden:

I usually don't tell my patients that I do comedy. Other people I work with tell them. But it's so funny, I'll finish treating them and they'll be, "You know, you're really funny," and I'm, "Oh, thank you so much." In the back of my head I'm, well, that's good because I get paid to tell jokes, too.

But often some of the support staff or people I work with, it's like their selling feature on me because I'm covering for their regular therapist and, "Oh, is she going to be good, am I going to like her?" And they're, "Not only is she good and you're going to like her, she's also a comedian. So not only does she have a good skill set for physical therapy, you're probably going to get a few laughs out of her." And they're, "Oh, okay." So it's become like a selling feature.

Tim Rush:

That's great. That's funny, because on one hand I guess you feel like you have to live up to the introduction all the time, but I think it would be also a great way to break the ice with the patient. So how does this affect your physical therapy career? I mean, what have you seen it change?

Dr. Laura Hayden:

With my physical therapy career, my attitude towards it is a lot better. Some of it has to do with just time in the saddle, and also now I enjoy treating patients a lot more now than I did when I was a young practitioner, maybe because of the things I've learned and the skill set that I'm hoping to share with other people. But now I'll be on the road selling jokes and I'm so tired of talking and telling jokes that I can't wait to treat somebody.

So then I get excited about treating patients because I'm, oh good, I don't have to just tell jokes to people, I can actually do something where I feel like maybe it has a little bit more meaning in the world, maybe not, laughter's very important. But then I get tired of treating patients, I'm, I can't wait to get on the road and tell jokes. So for me the dichotomy is a really nice release on both sides. I get excited to go to the next job, and then you start to feel like, oh, I'm tired of doing this, and I'm, oh, I get to do this now.

So for me it's a great balance, and it really helps my physical therapy career, plus I've learned a lot about burnout and how to deal with it, and how to help give yourself a skill set to not fall into the bad habits that burnout can lead to. Because unfortunately it happens to everybody in every job, but particularly people that are emotionally and physically, mentally, and spiritually connected to their patients or people they're caring for, whether you want to extrapolate that to all the caretakers of the

world.

Tim Rush:

Laura, talk with us for a few minutes about your research on the healing aspects of laughter, and then ultimately how that did lead to you pursuing your doctorate degree.

Dr. Laura Hayden:

Well, laughter has so many amazing benefits that they haven't studied all of them, but it's antidepressant, it increases blood flow throughout your body, it increases endorphin release, it fights off colds, depression, anxiety. It also changes the chemicals in your brain. It actually truly changes your brain chemistry into happier setting without you even having to try. And it doesn't even have to be real. You can fake laughter and your brain still thinks it's real and will still respond in a positive way to it. So that whole fake it till you make it is actually true.

The fact that burnout is a huge problem for medical practitioners and particularly ones freshly out of school because they don't teach you how to protect yourself. When you do your criticals in school it's always like couple of months, maybe six months, but then you're done. But there's a whole new approach to it when that patient is in your life two, three times a week for years.

And because people that go into the medical profession in general are caring health care type people, that's why we went there, but we're also A personalities, because we never would have gotten through any kind of medical program if you didn't have that personality, I work really hard and this is the outcome. Now suddenly, I work really hard, I want you to be better because everything in my life turns out well because I work really hard.

And now here comes the patient that sometimes they're not going to get better, and that starts to mess with your brain, because everything in your life, you worked hard, it worked out right. Now suddenly here's a new entity. They didn't get better, and you were, what did I not do, I'm a failure, because we're such a goal-oriented success rated society. We don't go, "Oh my gosh, sometimes the outcome is not our responsibility." So my approach to all this is, a term I used in my dissertation is called detached caring.

You give all of you knowledge and experience to every patient every time with no prejudice about the patient, because you're not there to judge, you're there to help. And if you've given everything that you have to give and then the outcome is not your responsibility. You can resign yourself that you have done your very best, and if they didn't get better or they didn't respond to treatment it isn't because you failed, it's because there's an entity that you can't control, and you need to forgive yourself for that.

Also sometimes we get too involved in our careers and we don't find something that gives us joy, we

just go to work. And that applies to all careers, all jobs. We have to find something that detaches our brains from our job. And for me what I found out doing comedy is yes, you have pain. I feel so horrible, you're not getting better. I don't know what I'm doing, blah, blah, blah, that whole mind thing that's very toxic too. If I don't change my brain when I get onstage guess what's going to happen? I'm going to bomb.

You know what feels worse than you not getting better? Me bombing onstage. That feels horrible. So I actually had to learn to turn my brain off from the job so the patient stops invading my nights off, my weekends, my vacation, because I now need to focus on something else or I'm not going to be successful her. So it's learning to turn your brain off from that for a little bit, give it a respite if you will. That's how comedy really kind of saved me. Plus laughter is so freeing. It really does release the bondages of the stress of the day, that sort of thing.

Tim Rush:

Well, I can tell you are passionate. Where do you get it all from? What motivates you?

Dr. Laura Hayden:

To get up every morning or...

Tim Rush:

Well, your whole approach. I mean, clearly you're passionate about your health care career, you're passionate about what comedy brings to your life but also to others. What's your driving force?

Dr. Laura Hayden:

There's nothing in my life that has ever made me feel as amazing as making a group of people laugh. It's good for them and it's good for me. It's healing for both of us, and then, it's taken me a long time to be able to say this because we don't live in a society where you should be able to say that, but I actually am very good at my job as a physical therapist. I have people all the time, they're, "I've been waiting to hear from you. I've been waiting to meet you," because apparently I have a good approach, I'm good at my job, and they're, "No one's ever explained this to me before."

So I'm motivated by the fact that I've been given talents and skills that I feel like I need to share with the world, and I'm grateful that I have them. There's so much I want to do and accomplish, and every day I'm just, I have massive amounts of creative ideas that I just want to get out there and do it. I think it's partly genetic. My family's all sort of crazy and manic like this. I'm motivated every day for the experience to meet new people, and to try new experiences, and go and do new things. So for me it's endlessly Christmas.

Tim Rush:

Well, my producer mentioned the book. Tell us about the book you're working on.

Dr. Laura Hayden:

Well, I'm working on trying to turn that 482 page very technical dissertation into a very user-friendly format for the things I've learned about burnout and laughter into something hopefully useful for not only health care professionals but maybe everybody, because I'm really trying to turn all of this energy and things I've learned into a speaker platform.

And I've done some speaking on it, but I really need to have that book for the back of the room sales and also for some reason when you write a book people think, oh, then you know something, you wrote a book. I've been in the process of turning that into a very user-friendly format, and I'm about halfway through. But my goal is to have it done by the end of the summer because I really have people that are, "We need that, we need that now."

Tim Rush:

I want to thank you for being our guest today, Dr. Laura Hayden, and sharing with us on how comedy has essentially saved your career in health care. Is there a way that they can connect with you online? Do you have a website?

Dr. Laura Hayden:

I do. You go to www.laurahayden.com and you see my big head. You can contact me through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, you can e-mail me from there. It's not hard to find me. If you get the supermodel with the name Laura Hayden it's not me. There's a supermodel _____ (16:12), it's an ongoing thing. She's about 12 years old. So you'll know instantly that that's not me. I wish I was on the cover of Vogue, but I'm not. You could just find me on the Web. I'm easy to find.

Tim Rush:

Well, thanks again, and please come back when you finish your book, and tell us all about it.

Dr. Laura Hayden:

I will. Thank you, Tim.

Tim Rush:

I'm your host, Tim Rush, and thanks for listening.

Announcer:

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