



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HEATHER MCKINNEY

Off the Cuff

A Dallas attorney takes the stage as an improv comedy actor.

INTERVIEW BY ERIC QUITUGUA

On one stage, Heather McKinney is a Dallas-based wealth management attorney. On another, she's an improv actor and comedy writer. Influenced by *In Living Color*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, and *Mr. Show*—sketch comedies where the absurd meets a sane world—the lawyer-turned-actor is a fixture at the Dallas Comedy House, where she works with her troupes, Watermelon and AH, OK.

Heather McKinney, a graduate of the Dallas Comedy House's improv program, is a fixture with her troupes, Watermelon and AH, OK.

What came first? Was it your interest in law or was it your interest in comedy?

I worked part time as a file clerk at a law firm in New Orleans and, fun fact, the case manager did standup. It was so funny to me because this guy was a professional person but then also got to do comedy. He gave me a lot of leeway. If I was filing a deposition, he would say, "Read it and you can see why I ask the questions I ask and think off the cuff." I definitely always wanted to go to law school and be an attorney, but when living in Chicago later on, I loved performing too. If there's a way I can do both, I'll find it.

How did you link up with the Comedy House?

The first improv class I took was in 2007 at a place called ComedySportz, which was originally in the West End. Then in undergrad in Chicago, I was part of an independent troupe, and we performed all over. I came back to Dallas and went to Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law. Once I finished school and studying for the bar, I realized that I really missed doing improv. At SMU, I did the *Law Follies* sketch show and I loved that, but coming out of the routine of working, I needed a good hobby. Some people play tennis. I missed doing comedy. So I looked up DCH's classes, signed up, and then have been into it ever since.

Do you have any recurring themes, characters, or sketches in your writing?

I just started a troupe called AH, OK. Our show is called *Good Morning, Tonight!* and is improvised in a morning show format like *Good Morning Texas* or *Good Morning America*. We use suggestions from the audience and focus on their hometown and its quirks. For Watermelon, our shows naturally tend toward the absurd in the third beat. During one show, in the first beat, I shushed my scene partner and said, "Honey, you are talking during this play. We waited weeks for these tickets and you are making us look bad!" My stage partner said, "Well, I waited this long to see *Seussical the Musical*, I don't care what anyone thinks!" From there, all the other cast members walked out into the audience and started heckling us onstage as if they were *Seussical the Musical* characters—and they did it in rhyme. By the end of the show, we were feuding and insulting each other in rhyming song.

How do you know something you write will be funny to an audience?

When I think of something that makes me laugh, I put it down on paper. Then I read it back to myself to see if it still works. There's nothing like being in a collaborative work environment such as with the improv troupe Watermelon that I perform with. The idea in improv is "yes and ____?" You say an idea and someone says, "Oh, yeah, and what if this happened?" And then someone else says, "Oh and then this happens next." You get to this absurd, great, brilliant place that sitting alone in your house you would never get to. So I think that no matter what for writing, whether it's prose or sketch, it's always great to have a writing group.

How much do nerves factor in when you're onstage?

If you told me that I could go onstage and perform in front of 200 people or I could go into a room and network with 20 people, I would say, "Oh, put me onstage. Where's the microphone?" I'm more comfortable onstage. But for the members of the troupe that get nervous, when we're backstage together, we do a warmup where we all get our minds on the same page. And the very last thing at DCH, before you go onstage and break the curtain, you take your palm and tap it on everyone's shoulder and say, "I've got your back." I know when I'm in a scene, if it's not going well, that someone, out of nine of us, will take me out of the scene to make it better or cut the scene off because it's gone where it needs to go. I don't get nervous because I know the other Watermelons have my back.

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How do you balance comedy and your law career?

I just forsake all things for comedy. No, I'm just kidding. Luckily, the most time-intensive thing was taking the classes because they were on Thursdays from 6:30 to 9:30. My boss is understanding. I'm in-house, so I don't have billable hours, and we work with the stock market. So 3 o'clock to 5:30 is more administrative work. I can come in early and do it or stay late on other days and do it.

Do you have any long-term plans with comedy?

We're submitting AH, OK to festivals. I'm excited about *Good Morning, Tonight!* We just had a four-week run of shows and it went so well. Hopefully, we're getting on the schedule for this next round at Dallas Comedy House and will see if we can expand into YouTube or short films. We just need to submit to comedy festivals, travel a bit, and get our name out there. **TBJ**