

Jay Leno Apologizes to Joke Victim's Friend

Brent Hopkins - Daily News; Los Angeles, Calif.

Wendy Brogin couldn't mistake the voice - that voice - coming through her phone.

It's one heard in millions of American living rooms most nights. With its broad New England roots and California polish, it has chatted up celebrities and politicians. The voice that regularly picks on Kevin Eubanks also cracked wry about the shooting of Brogin's good friend, offending her.

And now, that voice was apologizing to her.

"He said 'Hello, Wendy, this is Jay Leno,'" the Sherman Oaks resident remembered. "'I'm calling about the letter you wrote and I want to apologize. I just want to let you know we make mistakes sometimes and we don't mean to hurt people.'"

Brogin, who usually doesn't think much of celebrities, was amazed.

The "Tonight Show" host had aired a sketch several days earlier likening Vice President Dick Cheney's accidental shooting of a friend to the 2003 videotaped rampage by a gunman outside the Van Nuys Courthouse. The latter incident sent Brogin's friend, Canoga Park attorney Gerald Curry, to the hospital, and she found Leno's jokes tasteless.

So she sent him a letter on a Thursday, told him she was aghast and asked him to "do the right thing relative to this matter." By Monday, her phone was ringing, with Leno on the line. He offered his regrets, she thanked him and called him a mensch and a model for the entire community.

Leno, despite repeated requests, declined through a spokeswoman to comment about the exchange, saying it was not done to curry public favor. This marks the second time in recent months that he's made semi-public amends with viewers who've taken umbrage at his commentary, calling Thomas B. Mudd of Saginaw, Mich., after making a mistake in January in a comment about Mudd's great-grandfather.

Of the talk show hosts, Leno has always played the role of the nice guy. David Letterman is the grouch, Jon Stewart the cynic, Conan O'Brien the whacked-out jokester. But Leno generally plays it safe and doesn't rough anyone up too badly, save his beleaguered band members.

According to the people who know him, however, this is no act.

"He's not a comedian who's interested in hurting people," said Tom Stern, the Woodland Hills-based creator of the comic strip CEO Dad who's known Leno for 25 years, going back to their days as stand-ups. "He's just one of the good guys - he always has been. (Calling people) is not a publicity stunt, he's not worried about ratings. He's not a saint, he's not Mr. Perfect, but he's a very, very decent guy."

That wouldn't be hard to see from Leno's charitable bona fides, with his participation in Love Rides to raise money for muscular dystrophy research and the hundreds of thousands of dollars he raised for tsunami and terror victims.

But come on, chuckled Tim Delaney, an assistant professor of sociology at State University of New York, Oswego. This is comedy - there's no code of ethics saying you've got to be nice or even accurate.

"He basically makes his living out of these one-line cracks mocking people," said Delaney, author of "Seinology: The Sociology of Seinfeld," which examines the underpinnings of comedy. "He's not a journalist, he's a comedian, and comedians tell jokes.

"If all of a sudden you have to apologize for telling jokes, does that set a precedent for everyone else? And if so, doesn't that just about get rid of the field of comedy?"

Ironically enough, Curry, whose shooting became the subject of numerous jokes on Leno's show, agrees. While impressed that the host made amends with Brogin, he took no offense that the incident that left him with wounds to the neck and arms had become a source of mirth.

"I like Leno, so it doesn't bother me," Curry chuckled. "I don't take it personally, so I wasn't upset with him. He's just making fun, but I think this says a lot about him, that he'd take the time to apologize."

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