

## IN PERSON

By ROBERT STRAUSS

PHILADELPHIA

*Now that I am married and have two kids, I feel the pressure to be cool.*

*On weekends, I try to act like I'm not married and have no kids.*

*So I'm at a stop light and look over at the guy next to me He's checking me out!*

*Wow!*

*But then I realize I'm in a mini-van. Ugh! Sure, he's checking me out I've got car seats in the back. At least he knows I put out.*

**A**LMOST a decade ago, Dena Querubin was nearly — as they say in the song — walking on air. She was Miss New Jersey 1995, and in the early rounds of the Miss America competition that year, she won \$1,000 in scholarships for her piano playing and another \$10,000 in scholarship money from Fruit of the Loom for having an innovative community project, getting the elderly and the young to communicate more easily.

But when the finalists were announced for the main event, her name was among the missing. All right, no Miss America, but still she was going to be able to finish earning her master's degree in gerontology at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and get to make 250 appearances around New Jersey, speaking to civic groups, the elderly and children.

"As I would go around speaking, I found that I could make people laugh," she said "I didn't think of it as a career, but it seemed like fun going around the state and having people smile at what you would say. I spent my whole year at age 22 doing public speaking, so it was a great experience"

Soon after her reign as Miss New Jersey, Ms. Querubin became Dena Blizzard, marrying her boyfriend, Jim, who works for the appliance maker T-Fal/Krups, and moving from rural Winslow Township, where she grew up, to Runnemede, in the Camden County suburbs of Philadelphia.

She earned her degree, but soon along came Dean, who is now 3, and Jacqueline, who is going on 2. Ms. Blizzard had taken on some part-time work after graduate school— helping with the Miss New Jersey pageant, occasionally appearing on the shopping network QVC and doing some speaking engagements.

Then last year, at age 30, her spirits sagged.

"My husband saw I was depressed about getting older," she said. As a present, he bought her a set of stand-up comedy lessons with an established Philadelphia comic, Joey Callahan It was an amazing tonic.

A year after that first lesson, Ms. Blizzard is a featured stand-up comedian on the Philadelphia club circuit, working mostly on the weekends. Though she earns only a few hundred dollars a week telling her jokes, her dreams of doing comedy for a living is not so



## From Barbie to Barbs, A Road Less Traveled

### Ex-Miss New Jersey Turns to Comedy

far-fetched. While she is not yet in the realm of the Seinfelds and Roseannes, she is at least a couple of steps up the ladder.

Her schtick is — somewhat on the order of Roseanne — "domestic goddess" comedy. She talks about having small children, about being a mother, about trying to make a marriage survive under the stress of young family issues, about how men turn from Romeo to couch potato after a few years and, sometimes, about it being forgotten that you were once a beauty queen.

Yes, I did pageants in New Jersey, a place where they have Miss E-ZPass and Miss Witness Protection Program.

I got to the Miss America Pageant and, well, let's say I came in the top 50.

My platform was FEED THE CONTESTANTS!

*You know, one dumb contestant ruins it for all of us. There was this one, they asked her what her view of euthanasia was. So she says, "I think the youth in Asia are very well taken care of..."*

The Comedy Cabaret in Northeast Philadelphia billows with cigarette smoke. The few dozen people who crowd into the showroom in an old Best Western motel along an industrial stretch of the Roosevelt Boulevard, far from the center of the city, definitely up for a few laughs late on a recent Friday night. Everyone is smiling, many are smoking and all of them are loosened up after a drink or two.

There are four levels of comic in the club stand-up world, Ms. Blizzard says as she looks over her list of jokes in an ante-room at the



Photographs by Annie McCormick for The New York Times

"As I Would go around speaking, I found that I Could make people laugh," said Dena Blizzard, who was Miss New Jersey in 1995.

cabaret. The lowest is the Guest, who gets to do five minutes of a routine and does it — for no pay — just for the experience of getting up in front of a crowd. Next comes the Emcee, who gets to do a few minutes of his or her own comedy while introducing the other stand-up performers. After that comes the Feature, a paid act underneath the star, or headliner, whom, presumably, the crowd knows and has probably come to see.

I was in a graduation show last fall and by March, I was an emcee," said Ms. Blizzard. A tall, slim brunette with a large smile She wears jeans and a blouse over a sleeve-less top for her act, with several pieces of understated jewelry It is casual, but not quite Mom-like. "On my Web site, I call myself 'one funny mother.' I am a Mom comic But, of course, the pageant is

always in there. I guess I can't deny that"

Growing up one of three sisters in a middle-class household, she said, she was never the pageant type. She studied classical piano and was a biology major at Rowan University. But during her sophomore year in college, she discovered the scholarship component of the pageant world. Knowing she wanted to go to graduate school and knowing, too, that she would have to find a way to pay for it, she entered and won the Miss Gloucester County pageant. She failed in her first attempt at becoming Miss New Jersey, but two years later became Miss Spring Lake Heights.

"There are closed pageants, like Miss Gloucester County, where you have to live there or be a student there, and then there are open ones, like Spring Lake," she said On her second try, playing her signature piece, Beethoven's "Pathetique," she became Miss New Jersey.

Yet much of that is forgotten as she takes the stage at the Comedy Cabaret. The crowd chuckles at her memories of the pageant, but the guffaws come at her relative risqué pokes at young marriage and her plunges into exasperation about having young children.

*Having two kids you have the pressure to be P.C. Be nice and polite. But there are times you just want to give that up.*

*Yes, this one is Damien He's a devil*

*And, yes, the 1-year-old. This is Linda Blair. Watch as she spins her head."*

Ms. Blizzard's entertainment career is branching out slightly. She is doing a few corporate dates ("conventions and such want some clean comedy to break up the meetings," she said), synagogue and church shows, clubs from the Shore to Trenton and Philadelphia. She does a women's health show on some Comcast cable stations and is an anchor on QVC for the shopping network's line of luxury bath products called Solitude Mostly, though, she said, she still thinks of herself as a mother first. Her husband, who is in the Air Force reserves, spent a lot of the 18 months after the terrorist attacks of Sept 11, 2001, on active duty, so their lives are only now returning to normal.

"I don't know what the next thing will be, but this is fun for now," she said. "I'd like one day, I guess, be part of a talk show where I can do comedy My husband, well, he is supportive from What I can see He knows I go places on weekend nights where men are drinking alcohol and he never has said anything to make me stop doing it.

"It's not where I expected I'd be, especially after getting my degrees," she said. "I still would like to do things with intergenerational study, kids adopting grandmothers and that sort of thing. But I like being one funny mother and, who knows, Jerry Seinfeld once did corporate comedy, too."