

One Night Only: Humor and Humility on Stage (Roll Call)

By Ivan Natividad

So, President Barack Obama, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Speaker John Boehner are on an ocean liner and it sinks. Who is saved?

The country — ba dump bump.

The jokes are likely (although not guaranteed) to be funnier on Wednesday night when a collection of wisecracking D.C. politicians, journalists and others gather for a bipartisan comedy event for charity.

The 18th annual "Funniest Celebrity in Washington" competition will be held at the DC Improv comedy club on Connecticut Avenue, showcasing an array of political celebs looking to game their gift of gab before a packed crowd of eager philanthropists.

"It's a great opportunity for people in politics to get out of their shell," event associate Katelyn Gimbel says. "It's fun to see people that work in really serious fields to show people a lighter side but also raise money for a good cause."

Proceeds will benefit the Susan G. Komen for the Cure foundation. Ancillary benefits include the chance to laugh with people you might be fighting with next week.

"I do some political jokes and a bunch of observational humor," said longtime participant Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform. "From children jokes to marriage jokes to poop jokes, any [material] that comes up when you got a bunch of kids running around."

On the not-so-funny side of things, Norquist found himself at the center of the debate over the failure of the super committee to come up with a deficit reduction plan. That might serve as fodder for some amateur humorist on Wednesday, but event founder Richard Siegel said the night is an opportunity for people of all political persuasions to look beyond partisan agendas, if just for one night.

"It's the most unique experience out there," Siegel said. "Democrats and Republicans sitting together with no politics. It's like we can be civilized for once."

The event, often short-handed as "DC's Funniest," began as a public relations campaign for the now defunct Comedy Café. As the venue's promotions coordinator in 1987, Siegel wanted to find a way to attract more publicity.

"My boss was trying to find ways to get more media in the cafe, so he decided to start a celebrity media comedy competition," he said.

Siegel thought a media-only event was too limited, so he decided to broaden the field.

"The first five years it was mostly local personalities like weathermen, local TV stars and White House correspondents," Siegel said. He decided to reach out to bigger names. "I started asking people like Chris Matthews, Tim Russert and Barney Frank," he said. To his surprise, they came.

"When we first started, we charged \$50 a head. The year [former South Dakota] Sen.] Tom Daschle headlined we moved it up to \$250 and raised \$110,000 for our charity," Siegel said.

In recent years, the event has seen an increase in participation by practicing politicians, including Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee (R), Reps. Linda Sánchez (D-Calif.) and Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), and Republican strategist Ed Gillespie.

"The year when Kucinich and Gillespie did a ventriloquist dummy debate, they were both so self-deprecating," Siegel said. "They [were] always willing to laugh at themselves."

That recipe of humility and humor continues to bring in lawmakers willing to play the jester and an audience eager to enjoy the spectacle.

In his third year as a contestant, Rep. Rick Larsen (D-Wash.) sees the show as an opportunity for personal reflection.

"Humor lets me step outside politics once in a while and gain some perspective on the seriousness and absurdity that exists in politics," said Larsen, the 2010 runner-up to Jon Lovett, a former White House speechwriter.

For Norquist, who took third place in last year's competition, participating year after year helps him hone a practical skill he can use. "If you're giving a speech, one of the ways to get people to participate is to tell a joke and make them laugh," he said. "It's their way of saying I'm listening."

This year's lineup of contestants includes Reps. Allen West (R-Fla.) and Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.), Daily Caller columnist Jamie Weinstein, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Clarence Page and Lanny Davis, former counsel to President Bill Clinton.

Hosted by NPR anchor and former CNN Pentagon correspondent Jamie McIntyre, the night will kick off with Sen. Scott Brown (R-Mass.) throwing out the ceremonial first joke. Brown's daughter Ayla, a former American Idol contestant, is scheduled as the evening's musical guest.

The entire story can be accessed by clicking [here](#) .

