



WANDA SYKES

STILL STANDING,
STILL LAUGHING

IN THE POKER GAME WE CALL LIFE, Wanda Sykes would appear to be holding a Royal Flush. She and her wife Alex were married in California before the confusion caused by the passage of Proposition 8. She's a successful media personality, having appeared in film and television and has won an Emmy Award for her work on *The Chris Rock Show*. She's an undeniable comedy force. And she recently beat the odds in her battle with cancer.

With regard to the last, she sees her health struggle as more of a disagreement than an all-out war: "I'd like to say it was a 'skirmish.' We had a tiff. Cancer said something about my mama, and I had to slap the shit out of her."



In a recent interview with EDGE, Sykes explained how her bout with cancer began when she underwent breast reduction surgery earlier this year. Soon after that procedure she learned that cancer had been found. The pathology report showed she had DCIS (ductal carcinoma in situ), which is a stage-zero cancer. "I was lucky," she says now. "I found it early and the least I can do is share my story."

Although there remains some controversy on how to treat DCIS, Sykes opted for a double mastectomy – partly because of a history of breast cancer in her family. And with that surgery behind her, Wanda has made it her personal mission to encourage early cancer screenings – albeit with a comedic edge: "Now when I get on stage I may ask people

to stop staring at my boobs."

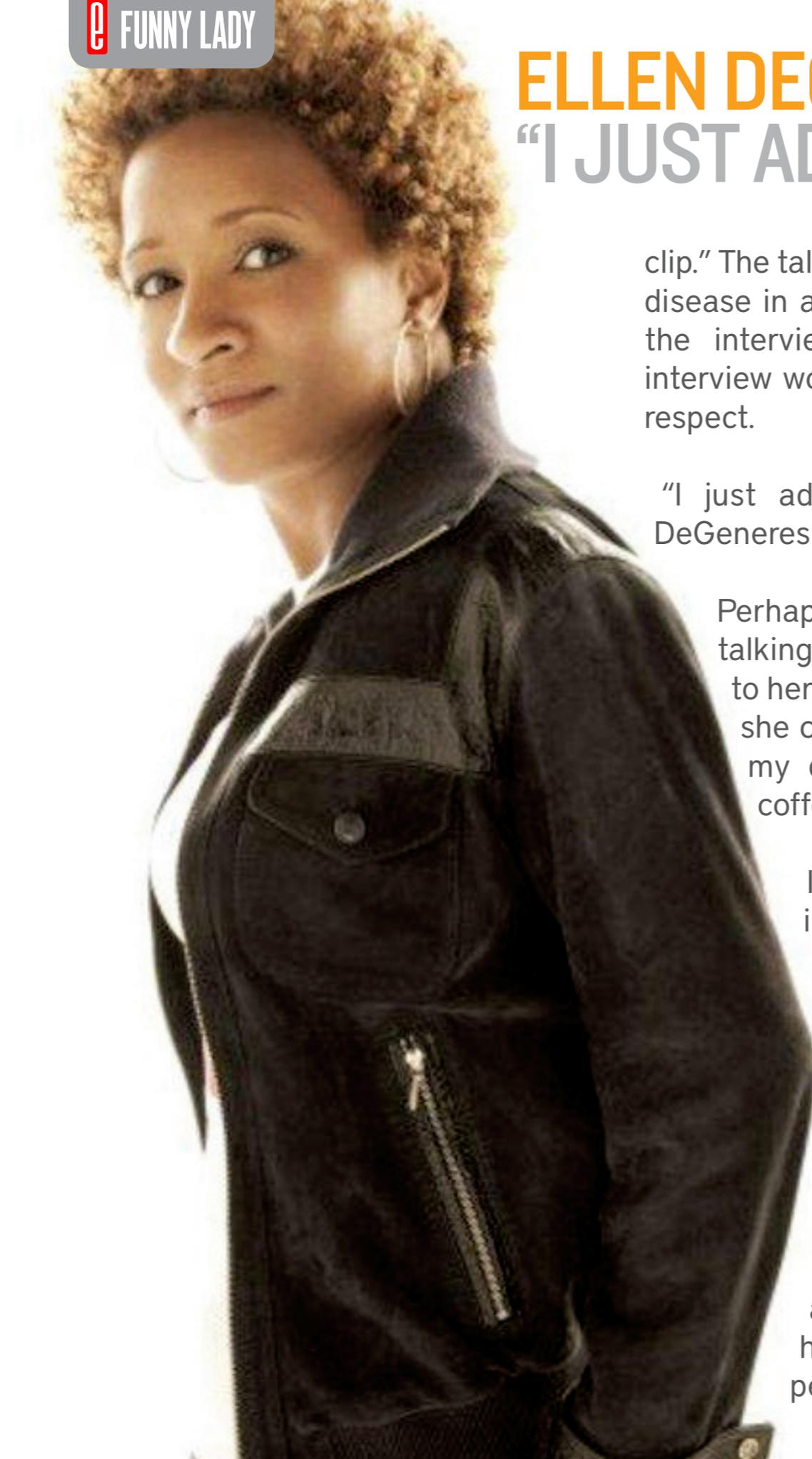
To wit, Sykes is on tour now, and her material has clearly been influenced by her trials. "It's behind me now," she sighs, "I'm back to myself. It was much easier to talk about it, but cancer ain't funny. I'm in the present now." She's now looking optimistically ahead, especially to an entirely new rack. "I think when all the work is finished my boobs are going to look better than my old boobs. I'm gonna have the boobs of a 20 year old."

Sykes acknowledged her cancer during an interview with Ellen DeGeneres; but the timing was still a surprise for her. "I thought I'd have all weekend," Sykes said. "Little did I know that Ellen was going to release a

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ELLEN DEGENERES TO WANDA SYKES: “I JUST ADMIRE THE HELL OUT OF YOU.”

A photograph of Wanda Sykes, a Black woman with curly hair, wearing a black leather jacket over a white top. She is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression.

clip.” The talk show host revealed Wanda’s disease in an advance promo supporting the interview. Nonetheless, the on-air interview won Sykes new fans – and new respect.

“I just admire the hell out of you,” DeGeneres stated during the show.

Perhaps that’s a fellow comedienne talking; and when the topic changes to her peers, she’s all wit. “Hold on,” she cracks. “Ellen and Rosie are at my door and Melissa is making coffee.”

It wouldn’t be a shock: Sykes is well loved by the LGBT community, including other celebs in the fold. She’s also connected with them directly from her breakout work on *The Chris Rock Show*, Cyndi Lauper’s True Colors Tour in ‘08, and her appearances in a number of films including *Evan Almighty* and *License to Wed*. And she has no lack of respect for her peers, either.

“It’s not like I see Neil Patrick Harris every day,” she winks. “I say ‘Hi,’ but we don’t call each other all the time.” While taping her CBS series *The New Adventures of Old Christine* the two happened to be working on the same lot. “I’ve been trying to get together with him to have a baby fight.” That’s Wanda’s version of a play date: “We’ll keep it clean – no weapons.”

Perhaps it’s surprising that Sykes hasn’t followed the lead of Harris in hosting the Tony Awards, the Primetime Emmys, DeGeneres’ gig at the Academy Awards, or *Glee*’s Jane Lynch, who did a bang-up job at this year’s Emmys. “You know I hate getting dressed up,” she explains with a grin.

That’s not to say that someday a hosting gig couldn’t happen – but only under the right circumstances. After all, this is a gal who has become known for her comic bluntness. She tackled Proposition 8 head-on and loudly advocates for marriage equality. She took up the battle against teens using the phrase “That’s so gay” as a pejorative.



ABOUT FELLOW COMIC TRACY MORGAN: “IT WASN’T PERSONAL. IT WAS ABOUT THAT ONE THING HE SAID THAT I WISH HE HADN’T SAID.”

Then there’s perhaps her most famous appearance ever – the 2009 White House Correspondents’ Association dinner, where she was the first African-American woman and the first openly gay individual to snag the featured entertainer role. When Rush Limbaugh opined “I hope he fails” about Barack Obama’s presidential agenda, she retorted, “I hope his [Limbaugh’s] kidneys fail.”

Her unequivocal support of political issues – particularly for the LGBT community – notwithstanding, the comedienne has emerged as a powerhouse in entertainment circles. Her HBO comedy special *I’m a Be Me* has been nominated for two Emmys, becoming one of her most critically acclaimed shows to date despite its airing against Barack Obama’s ascension to the presidency. “I was up against the president’s Inauguration,” she boasts. “How can I compete with that?”

She also made her theatrical debut as Miss Hannigan in a production of *Annie* at the Media Theatre in her hometown in Pennsylvania in December of 2010 and January of 2011, and has been touring across the states with her comedy show; she’ll land in Cabazon California, West Palm Beach, Florida, and Clearwater, Florida, in the coming two months.

She also has a special connection to the Big Apple; this month she’ll also return to Town Hall as a headliner for the New York Comedy Festival. The last time she visited the venue, she played to a sold-out audience of primarily gay fans. At the time, she’d not come out publicly, and was surprised at the connectivity she’d developed with the LGBT community.

But it was also in New York that Sykes gained her stage experience and broke through the ranks of brick-wall comics. “There are so many clubs in New York. You can hit five clubs in the same night,” she notes. “It’s a totally different audience if you’re down in the Village at the Comedy Cellar and then head up to the Comic Strip. There are so many different types of communities; the neighborhoods all have a different character.”

As a result, don’t be surprised to see Sykes pop in unannounced to a variety of venues when she comes to town; like Chris Rock, her mentor and one of her major influences, she often makes unscheduled appearances in local clubs to try out new material. “You get a better judge of the joke especially if someone

gets it Downtown but not Uptown.” Rarely, she hastens to add, has she ever faced that bane of the stand-up comic, an audience full of hecklers.

Tracy Morgan, who recently was criticized for anti-gay comments he made during one of his performances, is also slated to appear at the NY Comedy Festival. Sykes was among those who publicly opined on the controversy. “I love Tracy. I don’t have any ill will towards him,” she says. “He’s moved past it. It wasn’t personal. It was about that one thing he said that I wish he hadn’t said.”

Of course, Sykes throwing herself wholeheartedly into public foray is a regular occurrence, particularly when it comes to news events and politics. She

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is closely monitoring the imminent election season, particularly the Republican fight for the presidential nomination. “It’s so ugly,” she says about the GOP crop of candidates and their positions. “As a country, I wonder are we really going to vote for one of these jerks. Are any of them going to make it better? No.”

Her alternative? The present occupant of the White House.

“We need to show more support for the president,” she asserts. “It’s almost like we’re embarrassed or ashamed.” She points to Obama’s accomplishments regarding gay equality, particularly the recent repeal of the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. “We’re not standing up for him and we’re letting the Republicans beat us up,” she complains. “No other president has ever acknowledged Pride Month. That has to account for something.”

When not traveling the country lambasting politicians and delivering smackdowns on current events, Sykes can be found at home with partner Alex and twins Olivia Lou and Lucas Claude, to whom she gave birth in April of 2009. When we asked whether she’d open her Pennsylvania home to a reality producer looking to cash in on an LGBT star that has overcome cancer, is outspoken but who’s happily married and lives in a small town – she immediately rejected the idea.

“What the hell?! No!” she erupts. Then, after a thought or two: “Probably not. But I wouldn’t rule it out. I might be interested in producing something. Maybe I’ll break people out of rehab,” she jokes.

Whether or not she ever liberates the Betty Ford Clinic, the reality of facing cancer has steeled her for her next act. Just remember...don’t stare at her boobs. 