

West Michigan comedian offering ‘slice of nostalgia’ in tribute to Phyllis Diller

Published: Feb. 15, 2023, 10:39 a.m.



Laurie Ayers, Phyllis Diller impersonator, photographed in her home on Wednesday, Feb. 8, 2023. Drew Travis | atravis@mlive.com

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OTTAWA COUNTY, MI - Jenison resident Laurie Ayers is on a mission to keep the legacy of late comedian Phyllis Diller alive with “Being Phyllis,” her one-woman show highlighting the impact Diller had on women in comedy.

Ayers, 57, has a long history of performing standup comedy dating back to a Grand Rapids comedy club on 28th Street in the 80s.

She was first introduced to the celebrity impersonator community during the COVID-19 pandemic but said she has been performing character comedy in popular TV shows and movies for over a decade.

“For me to slide back into it in 2020 was kind of a natural fit because I had done it before,” Ayers told MLive/The Grand Rapids Press.

Ayers started performing as Lucille Ball from the hit sitcom “The Lucy Show” but said she ran into copyright issues. Refusing to give up on her dream, Ayers set out on planning who she could become next.

That’s when Ayers remembered one of the most iconic female comedians she grew up watching through the 60s and 70s, the late Phyllis Diller.

“Then somebody said, ‘You know, you kind of look like her,’” she said. “And the fact that I had been doing standup comedy, sort of resemble her and I needed another character to do, it was like it was meant to be. Everything I had been doing led up to that.”

Diller, who died in 2012 at age 95, was known as the first female comedian to perform as a solo standup act when it was a men-only profession, according to Laurie Ayers’ [website](#).

Diller was allowed to perform by dressing up in “clown makeup” and eccentric wigs, breaking the gender barrier and paving the way for future female comics.

“I try to embody her entire being, which consists of her standup act, which was a persona,” Ayers said. “But her whole life is what is important to me because there are a lot of people who don’t know her and don’t know what she’s done for women.”

Ayers said she’s been working on her one-woman show, “Being Phyllis,” for a couple of years. She said she uses a wig and other items from Diller’s estate.

Currently, Ayers said she is collaborating with other celebrity impersonators to be featured in variety shows across the East and West coasts.

Before working as a celebrity impersonator, Ayers spent her days as a deception expert and “human lie detector” for Homeland Security, resulting in the publishing of her book, “Drive-Thru Deception: Clues to Detect Deceit,” in 2017.

Much to her surprise, Ayers said comedy is the hardest job she’s ever done, even with her long history working as a government employee.

“You have to stand up there, be vulnerable and you’re asking people to judge you,” she said. “Our approval is one joke at a time, so it’s kind of like a head game.”



One thing she said she struggles with is attracting a younger audience, especially at a time when censorship is increasing, she said.

But still, Ayers said it’s something she wouldn’t change for the world. Her mission is simple: to get back to classic comedy.

“I love making people laugh,” she said. “So, if people can come out for an hour and forget their troubles, then I’ve done my job. It’s a slice of nostalgia that brings people back to a better time for a lot of people.”

To stay updated on what Ayers has in store with the legacy of Phyllis Diller, visit her [website](#).