

## Taking a Good Run at It: The Unstoppable Stephen O'Keefe



By ADRIENNE CLARKE

**It's an evening show at Yuk Yuk's Vancouver comedy club and the host has come to the stage to introduce the next comic.**

He warms up the crowd and then hands the microphone over to a young man who comfortably takes over the stage. He's what my mother would have described as a "tall drink of water."

"I'm Stephen O'Keefe, and yes, I'm deaf. Do you think I talk like this for fun?"

The crowd titters, maybe a little uncomfortably. They're not sure if it's O.K. to laugh at his almost robotic voice, but as O'Keefe launches into his act the laughter gets more raucous.

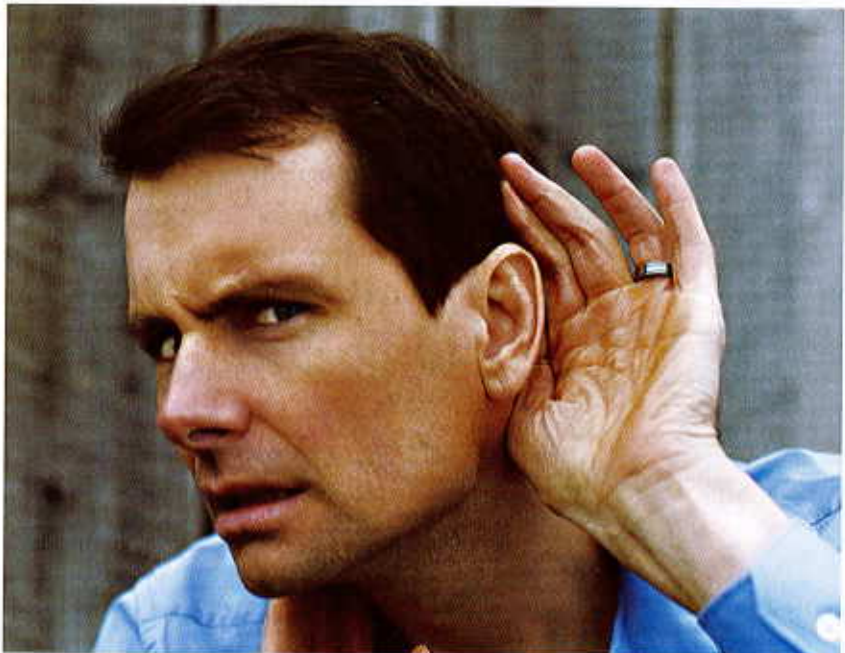
I first learned about O'Keefe from a documentary produced by the National Film Board. "Between the Laughter" is an intimate portrait of O'Keefe's life as a father, husband, speaker, stand-up comic, and co-owner of a successful manufacturing business.

It became a daunting task when I started to research the man I would interview. O'Keefe has two degrees, one in Law and another in Business. He's travelled to countries around the globe: Kenya, Germany, Australia, Mozambique, India – almost 50 countries in total. He's had a lifetime of adventures, including being in Berlin when the wall fell and getting lost in an underwater cave while scuba diving in Australia (he claims to suffer from mild claustrophobia as a result). He's been awarded the Terry Fox Humanitarian Award, led a community development project in Guyana, and was one of the first deaf lawyers in North America.

Oh, yes, and he's an Ironman triathlete.

I started to wonder if my one degree, a short stint in France, and handing water out to runners of the Gold Rush Triathlon in Timmins really qualifies me to interview Stephen O'Keefe.

As it turns out, he's a self-effacing, relaxed, and yes, funny guy.



Comic Stephen O'Keefe "listening" for the laughs



Stephen at age 6 with his first hearing aid

"The audience worries at the beginning of my shows that it's going to be some poor deaf guy on stage," O'Keefe explains. "They worry that they'll feel bad for me and it won't be funny, they get nervous and hesitant to laugh. My job is really to be funny from the get-go and reassure them that I am funny and that I understand the reality of what they're experiencing."

Because his speech is heavily accented by his hearing loss, audiences tend to pay particularly close attention to O'Keefe in a way they don't with other comics.

"If people are really drunk or it's late at night, I don't do well," he admits. "People need to concentrate to follow me and they usually do. In some ways, it makes it easier for me to do what I do."

Like every comic, most of his material comes from his own life. A lot of the humour comes from the challenges of being someone who lip reads and from communicating with a hearing world that doesn't really understand, not to mention a few cultural differences thrown in along the way.

In 1998, O'Keefe was in Guyana, South America, heading up a community development program. The village had no electricity, no running water, and, according to O'Keefe's blog on MySpace, "made Tuktoyaktuk, NWT, look like a thriving metropolis."

"I had an important meeting with the village chief, Les, whose support was critical to the success of our program," recounts O'Keefe. "I told Les, 'I'm deaf, so can you please look at me so I can read your lips.'"

Much to O'Keefe's chagrin, the Chief refused to make eye contact, looking down, and mumbling throughout their encounter.

"I tried to get his attention to tell him to look at me but he wouldn't. ... I felt like screaming: 'Hey Les! I'm deaf and I don't have ESP, so please look at me and open your lips!'"

No dice. In the end the two men played a game of cat and mouse with O'Keefe bending lower and lower to try and read the Chief's lips and the Chief bending even further away to avoid making eye contact. The bizarre encounter ended with the co-leader of the project who was sitting quietly watching the whole scene unfold, letting O'Keefe know that in this village it's a sign of great respect if someone refuses eye contact.

But that encounter was only a blip on the screen of a guy who knows how to communicate with just about anyone.

"For me, the verbal part of communicating is only about 20 percent of how people receive the message," he says. "The rest of it is other things like body language and cultural context."

O'Keefe is confident enough in what he knows about communicating that he's made it part of the vast array of projects he has going on at any one time. He now offers his services as an inspirational speaker and one of his hottest topics is, "Communication Tips from a Unique Perspective."

"Giving people this presentation really opens their eyes on how important the non-verbal aspect of communication is."

Testimonials from people who have attended his presentations agree. A few comments from delegates to the Disability Resource Network Conference in BC where O'Keefe presented in February 2007 were enthusiastic in their praise.

"This man was fantastic – whatever you paid for this speaker, double it...," said one.

And those communication skills he passes on to conference delegates get passed on at home as well. O'Keefe has a three-year-old son who has a different way of interacting with his father than with his hearing mother.

"Connor looks at me a lot more when he communicates with me," he explains. "He also points at things a lot more. He tells me when someone knocks on the door or when my wife calls me. I don't need a hearing ear dog – I have a hearing toddler!"

But I don't get the sense that Stephen O'Keefe needs much of anything he doesn't get for himself. I for one am left with the impression that he's unstoppable. His energy is infectious. He makes you believe that if you just put your mind to it, you really can do anything. It sounds clichéd, but that's what you walk away with after meeting him.

I have to admit I don't have any plans to run a triathlon or go scuba diving in the Great Barrier Reef, but I am inspired to find something that seems impossible and take a good run at it.

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