



## Made Montreal funny

Ernie Butler succumbs to cancer. Kept Comedy Nest afloat in lean times

**BILL BROWNSTEIN**

The Gazette

*Thursday, August 30, 2007*

Ernie Butler, who played a pivotal role in putting Montreal on the comedy map and in keeping comedy alive here, passed away yesterday morning after a brief battle with cancer.

He was 58 and is survived by his wife, Marie, their son, Ryan, 19, their daughter, Shannon, 17, and his daughter, Silver, 30, from a previous marriage.

The irony is Butler was the ultimate survivor. He kept his comedy club, the Comedy Nest, afloat during some lean times. He successfully battled his demons - drugs and drink - over the years and helped others do the same. Yet he couldn't beat the stomach cancer with which he had been diagnosed only 35 days ago.

"Ernie was a tornado, the most energetic man I knew," said close friend and comedian Phil Shuchat yesterday. "We were playing golf together last month. I saw him a few days ago. He had taken a nasty turn, but never lost his dignity or tenacity. He never stopped cracking jokes, either. I'm just numb. The entire comedy community is in shock."

Shuchat, like so many others, will be eternally grateful for Butler giving him his first break on stage. But, like the others, Shuchat says he really grew to admire the man more for cleaning up his act, for turning his life around and for "investing abundant love" into his family.

"Nothing seemed to stop Ernie," Shuchat noted. "But then this bloody disease came out of nowhere and nailed him. It's almost as if he sensed it was the end and that he wanted to go out quickly."

Comedy was his business, but Butler's passions were his family and golf. "The ultimate for Ernie would have been to play golf, surrounded by his family, and to organize the Nest schedule and do his radio show between shots," said comic Joey Elias, another close friend.

Elias will never forget that Butler gave him his first paying and headlining gig on stage. "He gave most of us here our first shots. He believed in me more than I believed in myself at the time. It's just impossible to imagine the

phone not ringing and Ernie asking me to do a spot for him at his club or on his radio show or to play golf together."

Scott Faulconbridge, another accomplished local comedian and friend, credits Butler for kickstarting a slew of careers here. "He helped so many of us. He also helped so many others with his charity fundraisers. Ernie's greatest accomplishment was successfully battling his compulsions for the sake of his family. "

Sun Youth's Sid Stevens was also devastated: "God must have needed a laugh in heaven, or Ernie wouldn't have been taken from us so early. He was a pillar of charitable causes in Montreal and a great friend of Sun Youth. He made his club available for fundraisers. Fifteen years ago, he had this wild idea of having métro and street performers do a benefit and raised \$12,000 in the process. Even when he was so ill two weeks ago and when he was supposed to host our golf fundraiser, he didn't want to leave us high and dry, so he got Joey Elias to step in for him. He was just one of those guys who really made a difference, not only to comedy but to the entire community."

CJAD boss Rob Braide, for whom Butler did a comedy show, said the station will miss his levity on air. "More than that, though, the city will miss him. Ernie was a great Montrealer, who contributed to the social and cultural life of the city more than we realize. "

Butler opened the city's first anglo comedy club in 1979, during a period when there really wasn't much to laugh about here for many anglos. But comedy proved to be a panacea, not just for audiences but also for a generation of young anglo comics who got their first breaks at Butler's Comedy Nest.

The same political and economic uncertainty that drove so many away was soon responsible for making Montreal a hotbed for homegrown comics. Insecurity has always generated great comic fodder, and it enabled wits like Elias, Faulconbridge, Shuchat, D.J. McCarthy, David Acer, Heidi Foss and Barry Julien to blossom.

"It might have been just plain naive on my part," Butler told me three years ago while celebrating the Nest's 25th anniversary. "But I figured the city could use a few laughs back then."

The Comedy Nest was on the scene even before the Just for Laughs festival. Butler helped program the fest's anglo component in the first year. And before he was launched on the world stage, a frenetic Jim Carrey, then 17, basked in the limelight of the Comedy Nest stage. Howie Mandel, as well as ex-Montrealers John Rogers and Jeff Rothpan, were also unheralded when they first chirped at the Nest.

With the inception of Just for Laughs 25 years ago, Montreal has since become one of the comedy capitals of the planet. Yet the Comedy Nest, along with the downtown Comedyworks, are still the only two full-time comedy clubs in the city.

The club, originally called Stitches and housed in a downtown joint called -

prophetically - The Wrong Number, changed locations more often than some change underclothing. For the last five years, it has been in the Pepsi Forum.

Despite Butler's passing, Shuchat insists the show will go on at the Nest. The club will close this weekend but will be open for business next weekend. "That's the way Ernie would have wanted it," Shuchat said. "Best not to mess with Ernie. He'll be watching over us."

Butler confessed there was one joke that always cracked him up: "Two guys walk into a bar ... ouch!" The purveyor of this howler: Butler's son, Ryan, 9 at the time, uttered it.

Funeral services for Ernie Butler will be held Monday at 11 a.m. at St. Monica's Church, 6405 Terrebonne St.

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