

THE COMEDY GAZELLE



ABOUT THE GAZELLE

When I first moved to Chicago, I was immediately struck by the level of talent in the scene. "Fuck, she's good," I thought as I watched Kristen Toomey annihilate a sold out Laugh Factory. *Why haven't I heard of her before?*

It's a question I come back to often, and a major problem here. The city's bursting with household-name-level talent, but unless you're in the midst of it, it can pass you by.

That's why I started The Comedy Gazelle – to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to share knowledge that can hopefully make the scene that much stronger.

Thank you for your support!

– Jerry

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MARK GEARY & THE LINCOLN LODGE

The Lincoln Lodge on Fridays is bursting with energy. One room empties as another fills. Audience members spill into the lobby, shaking hands with some, avoiding eye contact with others. Comics bounce between the green room and the bar, reliving bits and chasing validation. Bursts of laughter leak out as a showroom door swings open. At the bar, a first-year comic cashes in a hard-earned drink ticket: PBR. No tip.

When I first heard about The Lodge, it had already opened its doors. In my mind, it was just another club, a fixture at 2040 N Milwaukee Ave. I saw the obvious: fliers in the windows and clown portraits on the walls. What I didn't see was how improbable this place is: a non-profit built through decades of persistence, sacrifice, and the unwavering vision of Mark Geary, who quietly poured his life into the Chicago comedy scene.

For decades, Geary faced setbacks, financial strain, and countless reasons to walk away. Because he didn't, the Lodge grew into the community hub we know today. But 25 years ago, it was simply a show created by a few comics hungry for more stage time.

In 2000, Mark Geary, who had developed a reputation for producing the best open mic in town, was approached by Tom Lawler about starting a show together. Tom had found a space in the back room of a diner, The Lincoln Restaurant, which would become the Lodge's home for the next 15 years. But first, it had to find its footing.

"The first half a year we did it, it was absolutely bloody awful," a 56-year-old Geary recalls in his British accent. "It was just terrible. From one week to the next, you could have a genius show followed by an absolute piece of crap."

So, what did he do?

He created The Lincoln Lodge Cast, a structure giving ownership to a rotating cast of comics. "We sat down and we said, 'Comedians aren't invested in us because they get booked once a year; they don't have any ownership of it. So, we really invested in a core of people to give them ownership of what was going on. Then: boom, it was like double the audience, triple the audience.'"



Geary tells a story of former cast member TJ Miller, highlighting the work ethic and creativity behind Chicago's premiere comedy show:

"Back in the day, we would [hand out flyers]. I would go to Belmont L stop at 6:30am, flyer for an hour, and then get in my car and drive all the way up to my job in Waukegan. One day, I'm standing at Belmont, freezing my knackers off, and TJ rocks up, and he's got one of those foam neck brace things on. And I go, 'Dude, you can't be flyering. You're injured.' And he looks at me, he's like, 'I'll be fine.' So, I give him the flyers. We get to the end of the shift, and I've handed out about 13, and he's done the 300 other fucking flyers. I go, 'Alright, well, you gotta get to your job, I gotta get to my job.' So, he bends down, and he just takes the neck brace off and goes, 'Alright, I'll see you on Friday then.' And I go, 'You're not injured?' and he just grins at me and walks off. I realized this is someone thinking about what the end game is, and the end game is that person to have your flyer. Who is not gonna take a flyer off some guy standing there in a neck brace looking miserable as hell at 7:00 am?"

For comics of the time, the Lodge was a huge opportunity. The city was bubbling with talent, but stage time was hard to come by. "There was Zanies, but you

didn't get to go up at Zanies. So, all you had was open mics and a series of very shitty, short-lived showcase shows." Armed with a crop of talented comics, the show grew fast.

Geary tells another story:

"We would go to Ribfest every year, and we had a booth where we had this big cut out of Abe Lincoln's mouth. And you threw dog toys [in it]. If you got three of the four through his gob, you'd win free tickets. But to participate in the toss, you'd have to give us your email. So, we would stand at Ribfest getting hundreds, thousands of emails. Then I'd have to sit and type out some drunken scrawl. 'Does that say Dipshit67?' I dreaded it every year, but we couldn't afford anything else."

The hard work paid off. By 2004, the show was making enough money that Geary felt taxes would become an issue. He had an important choice: form an LLC or become a non-profit. "We decided, 'Eh, we're never gonna make money on this bloody thing. We should be a non-profit, cause that aligns with us.'" With that, a show in the back room of a diner officially became a non-profit organization.

Flash forward 22 years, and the decision still defines The Lincoln Lodge today. Unlike your average comedy club, the Lodge is driven by its mission, not finances. While most clubs operate as businesses and exist to make money, the Lodge exists to support comics and foster creativity. It lets comics rent discounted rooms for their shows and keep 100% of ticket sales. There is no required drink minimum. The only thing customers have to buy is a ticket, and that money goes directly to the comics themselves.

So, how do they keep the doors open?

Not easily.

15 years ago, Geary went to the Arts Business Council of Chicago, seeking a grant. "I give them our books and they go, 'Well, hang on. Where's your donations? You're a non-profit.' And I go, 'We don't have donations. We have the money that the board puts in.' And they go, 'Yeah, but if you don't have donations, you're not a non-profit. You're a business.' And I go, 'Well, who's gonna donate to us? We're a comedy club. We're not a ballet.' And they're just laughing."

In many ways, the Lodge is a victim of its own success. Customers see it packed out with shows, but most don't absorb the fact that it's an arts non-profit, operating under the guise of a comedy club. "It's interesting," says Geary, "if we just had a show with three people watching it, maybe people would go, 'Oh, yeah. Here, take our money. This is definitely a non-profit.'"

Back in its days at the Lincoln Restaurant, the struggle was similar. Despite the show's popularity, Geary was working an IT job and pouring his own money into it. "At one point we were going broke, like rapidly, so I walked into a cast meeting and said, 'Alright, we'll be broke in about six weeks, so if you want this thing to carry on, come back to me with an idea.'"

The cast lead, Cameron Esposito, met with the team and returned with a solution: Fem Com, a female and non-binary focused stand-up comedy class. It was a huge success. Still running to this day, Fem Com boasts alumnae such as Irene Tu, Julia Shippet, Alex Kumin, and Maggie Hughes DePalo. The Lodge continued to grow and make its mark on the Chicago comedy community.

Then, in December 2013, The Lincoln Restaurant went belly up.

"At that point I was burned out," says Geary. "I said to the cast at the time, 'I gotta be honest with you. If the Lincoln Lodge disappears down the plughole at this point, I ain't gonna be crying about it.'" With its spiritual home now closed, the Lodge received offers from several suitors to relocate. The cast voted to move to Subterranean. In early 2017, however, management received a letter from the city; Sub T's license covered live music, but not live comedy. Unable to charge for tickets, The Lodge was once again without a home. After a stint at the Under the Gun Theater in Wrigleyville, Geary almost pulled the plug. "That was nearly the end of me. I was like, 'I just can't keep doing this nomadic existence.'"

So why did he keep going? After 15 years, why not let it go?

"My dad said my biggest strength and my biggest fault was I have the tenacity of a bulldog and I'm never gonna let go. And honestly, it's a social mission, so it's easy to keep going," he says. "But I'm not gonna lie, I've had times where I've driven home from a show, I've sat crying in my car, gripping the steering wheel, going, 'Why am I putting up with this?'"

His story strikes a chord. Producing is hard; a difficult, time consuming, emotionally draining road. There are forks, flat tires, potholes, and complaints from the back seat. One night the drive is pleasant and beautiful, the next you want to fly through the windshield. Talking with Mark in his loose-fitting sweats, I realize I'm sitting with someone who has spent the past 25 years behind the wheel, chauffeuring comics to soccer practice.

"The most important thing is your vision," he explains. "You can't let anyone else tell you what your show's meant to be. You set the mission, and you live and die by that. If your mission is to get you and your mates stage time, then as long as you're achieving that, you're achieving your mission. Doesn't matter how grim it gets. 'Am I on mission?'"

Without a home but committed to the mission, the cast suggested moving to a small black box theater. Geary, figuring it was worth a shot, flew to LA and met with a neckbraceless TJ Miller to film a Kickstarter video. When it released, they got a bite. "Out of the blue I get an email from someone saying, 'Hey, you guys really do have a pedigree over there. I would like to help. I'm a big comedy fan.' That led to us hooking up with a mega donor, a guardian angel, who basically bankrolled [The Lincoln Lodge]. He wrote me a check for the full amount that we were asking for and said, 'It's good you had TJ Miller do the Kickstarter, otherwise I would've scrolled straight past it on Facebook.'"

Geary eventually found what would soon become the current and permanent home of The Lincoln Lodge: 2040 N. Milwaukee Ave. "I went back to our angel investor and said, 'I've found a space, but boy is it gonna cost.' And he's like, 'How much?' And I said, 'Oh, about 150 grand I think.' And he goes, 'Okay, let's get it going. We'll do a training center. We'll build something worthy.'"

At the end of the day, it cost \$350,000 and Mark's sanity. "I literally almost had a nervous breakdown getting this place built. I was going to the city every week trying to break through whatever thing they threw in front of us. And credit to our donor. Every time I went to him and said, 'The city says we have to spend \$80,000 on a HVAC system upgrade,' he wrote the check again."

Geary tells me about him and his donor walking through a wall-less Lincoln Lodge, putting tape on the floor, mapping out dimensions. I interrupt to ask a question I've been dying to know: "Is this all while you have your full-time job? How on Earth did you have time for this?"

"My dad was kind of a hippie," he replies, "So, when I got to 40, I decided if I do it right, I can save up in five-year increments. No eating out, no new clothes. And then that'll allow me to take little breaks between IT contracts. So, I took what I thought was gonna be a year off to get this place open, and in the end, it took me, I think, 18 months. I was down to the bones of my ass money-wise. I went back to work and it still wasn't open. Then we managed to get it open in January of 2020, a few weeks before COVID shut us immediately down."

Even today, with the club up and running, Geary's work doesn't end. He has a strong management and cast to rely on, but he's still fixing toilets and trying to raise money. "We are a nonprofit, and that means constantly scrambling. We gotta raise \$80,000 every year just to keep going. Expansion is a whole other level." Geary continues, "That's been our biggest failing, to be honest, is we have failed to communicate that this is a non-profit. And that's on us. If you went to 20 random comedians in Chicago, they would have no concept of the difference between what the Lincoln Lodge is philosophically to any other comedy club."



Bonus Content

ANOTHER MARK GEARY STORY

“At the time Hannibal was ascending, TJ Miller says, ‘We need to book this Hannibal kid. He's the future.’ And everyone in the room went, ‘Oh, you're joking. He's terrible.’ And TJ goes, ‘Nope, he's the fucking future, and he's great, and I've seen him kill.’ So everyone went, ‘Alright, well, if you're putting your rep on the line here.’ So I go to TJ, ‘I'm gonna book him, but I'm gonna book him on a show that you're on. I'm gonna stand next to you with a fork, and if he bombs every single joke, I'm gonna jab you in the bottom with this fork, right?’ And TJ goes, ‘Yeah, that's okay. It's a deal.’ And so we did it. Hannibal comes in and absolutely kills on his first ever Lincoln Lodge set, and I just keep looking at TJ who's grinning at me like, ‘You think I'm an idiot?’”

I love this story. Too many producers only book their friends, or people who are established or known quantities. They'll never take a risk on someone they saw at a mic or show they think is funny. Why is that? Trust your sense of humor. Be the first person to book somebody.

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

LAUREN WALKER

One of the kindest, funniest people I've met. Always a supportive and helpful comic who knows her stuff! Excited to learn more from her class. Yes, she teaches, too!

BREADXCRUMBZ

She is an exciting new voice in the Chicago Comedy Scene and puts in the work at mics, and only 6 months in is already a show producer! Sky is The Limit!

CLARA BECKER

She's hilarious!! Her jokes are amazing, I love how she takes the musings of a nervous type and delivers them masterfully on stage. She's super consistent and a delight to have around.

MAX VIELMA

He's been around for a while but this past month he's been booked more than ever. Including Lincoln Lodge, Comedy Bar, Reggie's and both Zanies. He also hosts a great late night mic in Pilsen.

AGAPITO RODRIGUEZ

He is a great storyteller and host, and he contributes a lot of opportunities to the comedy scene through his shows.

JONATHAN JANAS, MAUREEN NOLAN AND DEVIN GLASS

Jonathan Janas and Devin Glass have built two new mics into fantastic weekly staples in a relatively short amount of time. I would not be doing stand-up if it weren't for Maureen's Loose 4 mic.

JACOB CROW

He is building hype in a ton of new ways and delivering an energy at shows that keeps people coming back.

Vouch Audition Schedule

VISIT [COMEDYGAZELLE.COM/CALENDAR](https://comedygazelle.com/calendar) FOR EARLY ACCESS TO OUR AUDITION SCHEDULE!

THE COMEDY GAZELLE

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VOUCH DATES

Two open mic auditions, then a Laugh Factory showcase — every last Wednesday!

* Auditioning comics must be available for the same month's showcase.

JUNE 15

Audition #1 - Logan Theatre Mic

Logan Theatre

7:30pm signup | 8:00pm draw | 8:30pm start

2646 N. Milwaukee Ave.

JUNE 16

Audition #2 - S.L. Wine Bar

S.L. Wine Bar

7pm signup | 7:30pm draw | 8pm start

3224 Ridge Rd. Lansing, IL

JUNE 24

Laugh Factory Showcase

Laugh Factory

[Tickets available here.](#)

3175 N Broadway St

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE

