

Surgeon plays his way into famed humorist's act



Piano player Adam Dachman, a surgeon at the Dodgeville hospital, grins as Garrison Keillor introduces him in Dodgeville on Sunday.

Garrison Keillor's show at Lands' End

By Susan Lampert Smith
Wisconsin State Journal

DODGEVILLE — When Garrison Keillor took the stage Sunday for his 6th annual private show for Lands' End employees, there were probably some in the chino-clad crowd giving his clothes the once-over.

It appeared that the humorist and author was garbed in the mesh polo t-shirt, red, size, tall; page 47 of the summer catalog and that his sidekick, sound effects man Tom Keilh, had chosen the drifter sweater vest in light coral over a sun yellow shirt, a color combination made for radio.

One of their guest musicians, boogie-woogie piano player Adam Dachman, probably knows a secret or two about the scars beneath their seersuckers. Dachman, once a professional pianist, is a surgeon at Memorial Hospital of Iowa County.

Some of Garrison Keillor's one-liners 3A

"Many of you probably have marks on your bodies from his work," said Keillor, introducing Dr. Dachman to the 1,500 who gathered for the two free shows.

The story of why Dachman, 35, is both a surgeon and a pianist with a CD of his own compositions coming out soon, is a short one. "I have a Jewish mother," he said with a smile.

But since it involves teen-age rebellion and medical school rejection, Oprah and Michael Jordan, and the talent contest that disqualified him, we'll tell the long version.

Dachman, who grew up in suburban Chicago, began playing piano at age 5 and soon showed enough talent to be the featured performer at recitals. He studied at the Chicago Conservatory of Music and with jazz musician Allan Swain at Northwestern. His mother, Millicent, a concert pianist, supported him, to a point.

"My parents have always had the intention of me being a surgeon," he said. "But I went through this rebellious phase at 15 when I decided I wasn't going to medical school. I was going to be a rock musician."

He did have a classically based rock band, and was persuaded by a professor to attend Carroll College in Wausau, where he was assured he could follow his dual interests. He graduated at age 21 and didn't get into medical school right away, so he returned to Chicago to work as a medical researcher by day and play



Adam Dachman acknowledges the audience after his performance on Sunday for Lands' End employees.

piano by night.

"It was the time of my life," he said. His dad, Norman, was a professional fundraiser who started the National Basketball Association dinner, and helped get his son gigs. So in addition to meeting His Ainess and Her Oprahness, he got jobs with top musicians throughout Chicago.

The next year, he was accepted at medical school in Iowa.

"That summer, I left my piano behind and totally, totally committed myself to becoming a doctor," Dachman remembered.

But all wasn't lost musically. In fact, Dachman said the intense studying of medical school greatly increased his ability to sight read music. He would jog to the dormitories, practice on their pianos for an hour, then jog home to study.

"The day I graduated medicine school, I gave my mom a hug and said, 'Now can I be a musician?'" She said, "Now you can be a musician."

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Garrison Keillor spins yarns and draws laughs from the Lands' End crowd.

Keillor gently needles catalog, Lands' End

DODGEVILLE — Garrison Keillor comes to Dodgeville once a year and unless you're a Lands' End employee, you can't go. Keillor has been entertaining the T-shirt troops for six years as part of an agreement with Lands' End, which sponsors his public radio show. He delivered some funny lines Sunday about Lands' End in his incomparable radio announcer's voice, a voice as smooth as a Peruvian Pima cotton T-shirt. —Garrison Keillor quips.

■ "I'm a big fan of the Lands' End catalog. I won't tell you in which part of the house I read them, but I read them faithfully."

■ "On why he buys clothes, but not shoes from Lands' End: "I'm not comfortable buying shoes without a man kneeling in front of me. I like an act of adoration being part of it."

■ "Ah, soft luggage. The perfect graduation gift. If only they (graduating offspring) would take the hint."

■ "On the fact that cool colors don't come in tall guy sizes: "An elegant color such as French blue is considered beyond our interest, which would make an interesting class act in itself, wouldn't it?"

■ "The Kindest Cut, the swimsuit for women who do not suffer eating disorders."

■ "I'm a big fan of the Lands' End catalog. I won't tell you in which part of the house I read them, but I read them faithfully. We know who we are... Lands' End is never going to have a fashion show in New York City featuring blouses made of plastic and ostrich feather skirts. I'm never going to do a show on women who have fallen in love with their U.P.S. drivers and fight it out with the U.S. driver's wives."

—Susan Laupert Smith

Show

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musician." But it wasn't that easy. He had married Roxanna, a nurse, in medical school and they already had a child, now 9. Zachary, now 5, was born during Dachman's surgical residency in Detroit.

Since Dachman joined the staff of the Dodgeville hospital in 1986 and the family settled in Mount Horeb, he's had time again for playing and composing. He said performing surgery and composing at the keyboard have things in common beyond the obvious brain-to-hand connection. "I'm a fearless surgeon, although I do have the fear of God with me," he said. "When I perform the piano I'm also going for that perfect score. There's no less pressure."

Last winter, he was listening to Keillor's Prairie Home Companion and heard something about a talent contest. He scribbled down the phone number and called early the next morning. He was greeted by an answering machine with the snarling voice of Keith, who also portrays Larry, who appears on the radio show as Keillor's belligerent brother.

"So," started the voice of Larry. "You think you're good, huh? You have three minutes."

"I nearly hung up," Dachman said. Instead, he played one of his compositions, "Barnyard Rag," into the phone.

He was good enough to get a call from producer Steve Beck. They wanted Dachman on the show, but as they talked, a problem surfaced. The show was called "Talent from Towns Under Two Thousand," and Mount Horeb, a town over 4,000, was just too big.

But when Beck heard that Dachman was a doctor in Dodgeville, she invited him to perform with Keillor when he does the annual show for employers of Lands' End, the radio show's primary sponsor.

Dressed in tan pants and vest, Dachman sat at the Steinway and rapped in to "Barnyard Rag" and "Hoodoo," both compositions that will appear on his upcoming "Echoes in the Canyon," CD.

He also played "Gabrielle's Theme," which he wrote for Gabrielle Ufer, a deaf girl who has been profiled in the Wisconsin State Journal. The song begins as a tinkling, music box theme, a little girl twirling in a field of daisies, then shifts into a minor key to represent the medical and communications challenges Gabrielle has faced.

Applause from the Lands' End audience was thunderous.

As Keillor dryly remarked, "If you hear your surgeon play piano, you want him to play well, a lot of people in this room will not be changing their appointments."

Afterward, a motherly lady rushed up to congratulate Dachman and gushed, "You chose the wrong career."

In response, Dachman handed her his business card from the hospital and said, "Call if you need me."

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