



DeCaro, Frank (b. 1962)

by Linda Rapp

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Frank DeCaro has found success both in serious journalism as a fashion writer and editor and in comedy as a writer, performer, and radio talk show host.

Frank DeCaro's future existence came as a great surprise to his parents, Frank and Marion LaRegina DeCaro. After a decade of marriage, during which they had endured the painful experience of three miscarriages, they had given up the hope of having children, but when Marian DeCaro underwent an operation for a tumor in 1962, the couple learned that she was once again pregnant. Their only child was born in New York City on November 6 of that year.

DeCaro grew up in nearby Little Falls, New Jersey in a household that included his maternal grandmother, who lived in the basement and "ruled the roost." When he was a toddler, his father suffered a heart attack and survived but, DeCaro wrote, "stopped dreaming and lost any semblance of playfulness he ever had." As a result of his father's emotional withdrawal, the boy became especially close to his mother.

DeCaro's childhood was a mixture of Catholic Italian-American experience, pop culture, drag Halloween costumes, homophobic gym teachers, and Advanced Placement courses.

In *A Boy Named Phyllis: A Suburban Memoir* (1996) he recounts this mélange with characteristic humor; nevertheless, he also speaks touchingly of the pain of being "different," enduring bullying and slurs from schoolmates, and getting very little support from teachers who could and should have intervened to stop the abuse. The effects of his experiences were long-lasting.

He wrote, "It was years before I could hear the word 'faggot' uttered by or about anyone without feeling mortally wounded and being mentally transported back to the art class" where, as a seventh-grader, he had made a three-dimensional letter "F" as an homage to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, on which a similar "M" decorated the apartment of the sitcom star. When the teacher held up his well-done project, a classmate asked if the "F" stood for "faggot," whereupon the students burst into laughter, "but the teacher did nothing except to tell the class to quiet down, which they did when they were quite through giggling." The teacher subsequently told him not to "let those kids bother you"--clearly an impossible command.

DeCaro stated that "the other kids had known I was gay since [kindergarten, but] I figured it out in my junior year of high school, when I fell in love with a boy from my geometry class, the boy who would not only become my first boyfriend but would nickname me Phyllis."

A *New York Daily News* columnist had reported that singer Rod Stewart had nicknamed Elton John "Phyllis" and that John had responded by calling Stewart "Sharon." In fact, the reporter had the story backward, but "Phyllis" became DeCaro's nickname nonetheless.

At the beginning of his senior year in 1979 DeCaro played the Paul Lynde role in Passaic Valley High School's production of *Bye Bye Birdie* (book by Michael Stewart, music by Charles Strouse, lyrics by Lee Adams),



Frank DeCaro on the set of the Game Show Network's *I've Got a Secret* in 2006. Courtesy the Game Show Network.

which afforded him the opportunity to "come out of my shell, if not out of the closet." His bravura performance turned him from the kid who was bullied and called names into a school celebrity.

He was also enjoying a happy romance with his crush from geometry class but became depressed when the other boy suddenly called it off. DeCaro's concerned mother repeatedly asked him what was wrong, and he finally revealed his love for his classmate. Although his mother had told him that he could tell her anything, DeCaro wrote, "As it turned out, this wasn't one of the things that I could tell her." Her response to the announcement was to order him not to tell his father.

DeCaro rekindled his love affair with his schoolmate, and the pair dated through the spring and summer. Although they were happily in love, "we had no gay identity then, no sense of a gay community existing beyond the world we knew in Little Falls," he stated.

In the fall of 1980 DeCaro enrolled at Northwestern University as a journalism major. He soon befriended some gay students from the theater department and "formed a support system" as they embarked upon college and adulthood.

DeCaro came out to his father that same autumn. His father's reaction, "'You mean all those kids were right all those years!' . . . cut through [DeCaro] like broken glass" because his father had never attempted to protect him from his tormentors. The relationship between father and son deteriorated. "It would be years before we became close again, and by that time neither of us thought the day would ever come," DeCaro wrote.

After graduating from Northwestern in 1984, DeCaro sought work as a print journalist. During an interview for his "first big job," writing the menswear column for the *Detroit Free Press*, the hiring editor, he recalled, "asked how I felt about the 'faggot factor' of the job, and my jaw nearly hit the table." The editor, a woman, told him that "a male fashion writer is immediately assumed to be gay" and wondered if he could "handle that." DeCaro, then not out except to friends and family, recovered sufficient aplomb to tell the editor that he had "never done typical *boy* things" and that he did not "think that the 'faggot factor' [would] be a problem." What he did not tell her was the pain that he had felt hearing "that word five days a week for nine years."

DeCaro went on to write about fashion, entertainment, and popular culture for numerous publications, including the *New York Times Magazine*, *USA Weekend*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Vogue*, *Newsweek*, *Out*, *Elle*, *In Style*, *Spy*, *Esquire*, *Martha Stewart Living*, and the *Advocate*.

In the early 1990s he wrote a gay humor column, "Frank's Place," for *New York Newsday*, and in the later years of the decade he had a biweekly "Style over Substance" column in the *New York Times*, in which he dealt with an eccentric mix of topics from Cher in widowhood to artificial Christmas trees.

In addition to his memoir, DeCaro authored *Unmistakably Mackie: The Fashion and Fantasy of Bob Mackie* (1999), a richly illustrated look at the wide variety of costumes that the designer has created for the stage, the screen, and television. He also contributed comic essays to *Out, Loud, & Laughing* (1995, edited by Charles Flowers), *Out in All Directions* (1995, edited by Lynn Witt, Sherry Thomas, and Eric Marcus), and *How to Live a Sitcom Life* (1999, edited by Mark Bennett).

In a 1996 interview DeCaro commented, "There's a lot of pain in my humor. I believe in that old chestnut that comedy is tragedy plus timing." He sees comedy as "a great way to build bridges to the mainstream community," noting, "If you're funny and charming, people will open their arms to you and not be so scared . . . I've always worked in the mainstream, and if you take people by the hand, show them a good time, and make them laugh along the way, a lot of them will come with you."

DeCaro's work in theater, television, and radio has won him such fans. From 1996 until 2003 he wrote the "Out at the Movies" segments for the Comedy Central network's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, on which he played a critic who could find a gay subtext in just about any film. Peter Keepnews of the *New York Times* declared that DeCaro's "campy and often catty film reviews . . . are among the funniest things on television." Beginning in 1999 DeCaro hosted and co-wrote five hilarious Oscar preview shows called *The Fabulous Big 'O' Special* for the same network.

DeCaro cited Erma Bombeck as a model for his witty writing style. "She captured suburbia so perfectly and was so down-to-earth about it," he stated. "Actually, I wanted to be Elton John writing Erma Bombeck's column My sense of being amused and my sense of being horrified run so close together."

He called Paul Lynde a model for his *Daily Show* character but said, "I'd never want to be that bitter a queen." Nevertheless, he listed Lynde as a person who had influenced his comedy style, along with Charles Nelson Reilly, Rip Taylor, and Alan Sues, whom he considers greatly underrated as a comedic talent.

Also among the performers he admired was Elton John for his combination of glamour, outrageousness, and pure joy. When DeCaro met John at a Gianni Versace show in 1994, he expressed his appreciation: "You don't know how much you meant to all of us. You gave us strength and courage . . . even before you came out. You told us it was okay to be ourselves."

DeCaro has appeared as a guest on numerous entertainment programs such as *Showbiz Tonight*, *Inside TV Land: Tickled Pink*, and VH1 countdown shows. On a more serious note, he hosted an episode of the PBS glbtq magazine show *In the Life*.

DeCaro has made frequent appearances at film festivals, often presenting an evening of clips and comedy called "Flaming Screens." He has also appeared in several off-Broadway theatrical productions and in cabarets and revues.

In the spring of 2006 DeCaro became a member of the all gay and lesbian panel of the Game Show Network's revival of *I've Got a Secret*, along with actor-dancer Jermaine Taylor, comedian Suzanne Westenhoefer, and former major league baseball player Billy Bean.

Since February 2004 DeCaro has been hosting *The Frank DeCaro Show* on Sirius OutQ radio. The talk show is a perfect fit for DeCaro, who has said, "There's nothing I like better than getting in front of an audience and chit-chatting, and the audience knows that. They know I'm having as good a time as they are."

The show's web site accurately describes the people with whom DeCaro has chit-chatted as an "eclectic" group. Among them have been Martha Stewart, Clive Barker, Dick Cavett, Alan Cumming, Helen Gurley Brown, Michaelangelo Signorile, Elsa Klensch, and Bruce Vilanch. Gay and lesbian comedians such as Kate Clinton, Lea DeLaria, Elvira Kurt, Varla Jean Merman, and Lady Bunny frequently appear on the program.

A popular feature of the show is "Dial-An-Icon," which gives callers the opportunity to talk to "entertainment legends" such as Carol Channing, Bea Arthur, Elvira, and Butch Patrick, who played the son on the television series *The Munsters*, one of DeCaro's childhood favorites.

Each week the "Chez Phyllis" feature brings in chefs, cookbook authors, food critics, and restaurateurs to discuss food. There are also weekly segments with the show's regular correspondents, including *New York Observer* columnist Simon Doonan, entertainment critics J. P. Sarni, *New York Post* pet columnist Julia Szabo, and television expert Jim Colucci.

Colucci and DeCaro met shortly after the publication of *A Boy Named Phyllis*, when Colucci attended one of DeCaro's readings. He came back for other readings and a bit of flirting and soon invited DeCaro on a date. The couple has been together ever since.

They share their homes in New York and suburban New Jersey with their Boston terrier, Pee-wee Herman Munster Merman (simply Herman to his friends).

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