

It's no joke: AU alumna to deliver annual Riley Lecture

2/09/11



Don't expect the usual from this year's Riley Lecture, scheduled for 5:30 p.m. Monday, Feb. 21, in Nevins Theater, Powell Campus Center on the Alfred University campus. For starters, the title is "Amusing, Alliterative Title: Then a String of Academic Words like 'Paradigm,' 'Mechanism' and 'Identity' (Or How Feminists Can Be Funny)." And then there's the "lecturer:" a stand-up comedian, who also happens to be an AU alumna. De Anne Smith '98 majored in English, with minors in creative writing and women's studies. She thought for a time that she might be a poet - and actually does have a book of poetry published in Canada. "I was writing all the time" at Alfred, said Smith, taking creative writing courses with Susan Morehouse, professor of English; Ben Howard, professor emeritus of English; and the late Carol "C.B." Burdick, instructor in English. She calls writing poetry "solving little word puzzles," choosing the right word for meaning and cadence. And she sees some of the same skills put to use in writing comedy, when timing and word choice make the humor work. "You need to get to the point quickly, with something surprising" for a joke to work. "I think I had an inkling that I wanted to be a comedian when I was about 11 and watching comedy on TV with my dad," says Smith. "But it was something I suppressed for about 17 years." After graduating from Alfred, Smith migrated to Mexico where she was teaching English. Her partner at the time was a radio station engineer and she came home with a comedy CD, presenting it to Smith with the suggestion that she might be able to use it in the classroom. Listening to the CD "awakened my latent desire" to be a comedian, Smith recalls. "I had not even considered being a comedian, but then I heard that routine and thought 'This is what I want to do.'" She moved to Montreal, Canada, began breaking into comedy by going to open mic nights, doing five-minute routines; then she began to do weekend shows. Now she travels Canada, the United States and Australia, earning acclaim for the freshness of her material. During her Riley Lecture, Smith will entertain the audience with new material, which she describes as "one woman's experience in stand-up comedy, a male-dominated field." The atmosphere of many of the comedy clubs can be misogynistic and homophobic, "not a safe place" for a feminist and lesbian, says Smith. But her experiences also make for good material. "So much of what we call comedy contains a seed of anger. But it gets a laugh." Doing comedy "is actually really cool. It's an outlet. I may be seething but I can get people to laugh about it, think about it." She has had women come up to her after a show and say things like, "'I don't like women comedians, but I really loved you.' It's a numbers game. People hear 10 male comedians, but may only like two or three. They don't say they don't like male comedians because they only like two of the 10. If they hear two or three women comedians, but only like one, then they say they don't like women comedians. It's just that there are not as many of us." Smith tells people about her time at Alfred University. "I tell them the University is really small, and that the town

only has one stoplight. I tell them that it's the sort of place where you go over to your professor's house for dinner. You know your professors. You know everybody." - but that sometimes people think Alfred "doesn't sound like a real place." She has great memories of time spent in classrooms with Vicki Eaklor, professor of history; Karen Porter, professor of sociology; Fiona Tolhurst, former professor of English; Sandra Singer, professor of German, and Morehouse, Burdick and Howard. But also don't expect to hear any jokes with Alfred University as the punch line. "I haven't used Alfred in any of my routines yet. I'm not sure what I would say," Smith says. The Elizabeth Hallenbeck Riley and Charles P. Riley Lectureship in Women's Studies is presented annually on the Alfred University campus. Charles Riley and Elizabeth Hallenbeck Riley were AU graduates, Charles in 1935 and Elizabeth in 1936. Their daughters, Pamela Riley Osborn '62, Patricia A. Riley '65, and Melissa Riley generously sponsored the lecture series in memory of their parents.