

Chelsea White, 28, is a comedian, television host and producer, living in New York City. She was a finalist in the 2007 Comedy Cellar Laugh Off and worked on MTV's "TRL" — among other shows. New York comedy fans have seen her at Comix, The Knitting Factory and other popular venues. Chelsea is also the Secretary of the TSA New York City Chapter.

What's happening in your career right now?

I went back to freelance TV producing in September and my first gig is a ridiculously wonderful game show for MTV, called 'Silent Library.' Kids do crazy stunts for money, but the catch is the show takes place in a library so they have to stay silent, stifling laughter. I'm working in casting, too, auditioning the kids. We look for good friends with chemistry.

How did you become interested in pursuing a career as a professional comedian?

I originally moved to NYC to work behind the scenes in TV. I'm doing comedy now, but still paying the bills working behind the scenes. I wanted to be a TV producer and my first job was 'Total Request Live' on MTV. Here I am, this girl from a small town working for this show I loved watching and making a living in New York City! I never thought it was realistic to pursue opportunities in front of the camera. I was thinking — let's set realistic goals. But I had always loved performing, singing, dancing, acting. I was the goofy friend with a silly remark, who'd put on a costume to go to Walmart.

But in New York City comedy is more accessible. There's a young, hip culture. I could pursue something on camera with a paycheck from behind the scenes. I started to seek out comedy opportunities. I took a comedy class. It was a great jumping off point; a way to meet people doing the same thing; and it gave me good deadlines. I was paying money for this class and I had to write jokes. After that class, I slowly but surely tried to network and find open mikes, find out which shows were good to see, and where to meet people. I started being committed to doing comedy every night after work. I'd perform or go to an open mike or meet people running shows. Networking, the hustling game, being public and writing, is integrated into the stand up comedy culture of the city.

Why comedy? Did you use comedy to deflect teasing as a child?

I definitely think that I more often used humor as a kind of defense mechanism. I'm more likely to be the goofy girl making fun of myself than to deflect a comment about my tics. More often I'd dismiss it with a little white lie and change the subject, then segue into telling a joke.

Do you think TS has had an impact on your career?

I'm sure this is what everyone says; the impact is positive. I'm slowly but surely trying to integrate OCD into my comedy but not so much in the way of TS jokes yet. I haven't managed to find the one that hits the nail on the head.

When I'm on stage it's not on my mind and it has not held me back. I'm doing my thing and my tics fade. A TS joke is a tricky thing. Obviously the biggest stereotype is people with uncontrollable cursing. Every time it's portrayed, that sensationalist aspect of TS is emphasized. It seems untrue if I don't address that. I feel as though I have to bring up the stereotype of swearing while turning it on its head. That's a lot to convey in a line or two. I don't want to take the easy way out. There are a million tacky things that would get a laugh. That's not what I want. I want to find the joke that hits home and dispels the stereotype.

Does anyone else in your family have TS, or a related disorder?

Probably all of my family has OCD and a lot of my cousins have ADHD. One of my second or third cousins that I've only met once has a severe case of TS. Unfortunately we've only met at family reunions.

Was your family supportive?

Absolutely! My parents were proactive. I feel like I owe them a lot — like a big mansion somewhere if I hit it big. My mom has her degree in early education. She knew it was TS as soon as I started to exhibit some tics at 2 or 3. She started taking me to doctors. We got the diagnosis and she kept the conversation going with me. She was always making me feel that it's under control and that everyone has their thing and that I should let them know if I wanted to look into meds — which I never did try.

I'd hold my tics in during the day and let them out at night. Parents are supposed to love their kids unconditionally and never say 'keep it down' or that TS was an issue at all. In the past few years, since getting involved with the New York City TSA Chapter and national TSA, I thought it was normal course to have that support. It's incredible to me to meet people who weren't diagnosed



photo by: Gemine Esposito

until they were 20, 30, 40. I was fortunate to have been diagnosed so young and to have had parents seeking out the answers.

How are you doing now?

TS waxing and waning is associated with life changes and stress and that's pretty accurate for me. It spiked when I first went to college and spiked when I moved to the city. For a while I was on an even keel, but it's a little worse lately, but still manageable. I have a moderate case.

How do you deal with stress?

I think my biggest thing is exercise. I ran the NYC marathon this year for TEAM TSA. It was the most incredible experience. It's awesome to do this for a cause that's important to me. I've been running since college — every single morning, probably more than I should run, for 30 minutes to an hour every day.

Sometimes I take a walk and let out a few tics. Comedy can make you stressed out, but I think about it and write a joke, and flip my state of mind.

Do you have any advice for kids with TS?

It helped me not to talk about it when I was younger. I was not ashamed, I just didn't want to have the conversation. I didn't want TS to define me. As I got older, out of high school, I suddenly flipped my state of mind and wanted to talk about it as much as I could. It was a huge release. It feels great to talk about it to friends, co-workers, strangers... It's a hard thing to talk about, but once you start talking, it can be therapeutic and you can keep spreading awareness. ▣