Ellen DeGeneres Talks Feelings, Fun and Finding Dory

Ellen DeGeneres is a lot like the cartoon fish she gives life to in Disney/Pixar’s Finding Dory, opening June 17. Much like Dory, whom we met in the hit 2003 movie Finding Nemo, DeGeneres, 58, is undaunted, kind, strong and loving, swimming on despite the obstacles in her way. But unlike Dory, whose amnesia causes her to remember almost nothing, DeGeneres remembers a whole lot.

The native of Metairie, Louisiana, hasn’t forgotten the slow road to fame in the 1990s and how her first prime-time comedy series, Ellen, was abandoned by advertisers and the TV network when it flopped, capsized in part by backlash and negative response to her “coming out” as TV’s highest-profile lesbian. Like Dory, she swam on. She went back to doing stand-up comedy, created her own afternoon-TV talk show and hosted the Emmys, Grammys and the Academy Awards—twice.

In 2008, DeGeneres married Australian actress/model Portia de Rossi, 43. Both vegans, they share a passion for animal rights, environmental causes and renovating houses. Parade’s Dotson Rader met with DeGeneres in her office on the back lot of the TV studio complex in Burbank, California, where The Ellen DeGeneres Show has been produced for 13 years.

What was your childhood like? Was it fun?

I grew up in a very conservative home. My father was a first reader in the Christian Science Church, which is similar to being a preacher. There was no drinking, smoking or cursing. I didn’t see deep emotion from my parents. It was all very polite and very surface. I never knew how anybody was feeling. Because of that religion everything was fine all the time.

Isn’t it dishonest to pretend you’re happy when you’re really angry?

Exactly. I never saw anyone angry—so when I was 13 and my parents divorced it was a huge surprise to me because I was told everything was fine. It was very confusing. That’s not a healthy way to grow up. It was very hard to express yourself. A kid should be told that you can have feelings. I have a lot of feelings. You can feel sad and angry and hurt. But the only feeling that was approved of is happiness—that was it. How can you have happiness when you’re not honest?

How did that emotional repression affect you?

As a young girl, I noticed things a lot more. I started seeing that things weren’t completely as everyone said they were. I noticed everything because I had to after my parents divorced. At 13, I sort of became the parent, taking care of my mother.

Did that experience influence your comedy?

I think my comedy came from observing little details in life. What is most important are the details, not the broad strokes but noticing what’s in between. One of my first jokes was the fact that when somebody tastes something disgusting, they always want you to taste it too, like, “This is disgusting—taste it!” And people do.

Why could you see what others never saw?

Because I was very tender. I was very sensitive, and I still am. I never want to hurt anybody. I want to make people laugh. I didn’t think it was ever funny to make fun of people. There’s so much to laugh at without it being at someone else’s expense.

You end each TV show by telling your viewers to be kind to each other. Why is kindness so important to you?

Because I’ve been treated in a way that has not been kind, respectful or considerate. I learned compassion from having experienced some bad stuff.

After your parents divorced, you stayed alone with your mom in New Orleans?

Yes. My mother was going through a hard time. She dated lots of really horrible men and had bad experiences. She went from being my mother to being somebody I was watching date men. At 13, it’s a weird thing. Then she remarried and had breast cancer right away, a really tough thing for her. I had to make her laugh. [My comedy] started from me trying to make her happy. It felt really good to have power to make people happy. That’s my talent. Not that I thought I’d make money from it.

You have an older brother, Vance. What happened to him?

He left, angry. He was 17. He didn’t want to live with either parent. He was in a band. Now we’re very, very close. He’s great. He is very talented and works with my production company.

You went to the University of New Orleans for less than a semester and dropped out. Why?

School just was not interesting to me.

Before Ellen was Ellen: Do You Remember Her 10 Best TV Appearances?

Were you surprised when ABC abruptly canceled your hit sitcom after your character came out?

It was a sucker punch. I didn’t expect it. I knew that there was a big chance that this was the end of my career. But I’m grateful for it. I got to start over again and create this talk show. There are people who don’t know about the sitcoms, or my stand-up comedy. They think I’m just a talk show host. That’s fine with me.

On your talk show, everything is positive, despite what may be happening that’s bad in the real world, say in politics.

I don’t do political humor. I never have. Trump is being attacked by everybody because it’s an easy thing to do. Stephen Colbert goes after him every night and so does Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel. A lot of people do. I don’t. I don’t want to make fun of anybody. It’s not who I am.

Get a Peek at Ellen’s Quirky Design Style in Her New Book Home

Your show seems unrelentingly happy. It is a happy show, on purpose. I represent happiness to a lot of people. I want to keep myself as open and as nonjudgmental as possible. Before the show was picked up, I think a lot of station managers thought I would have an agenda to try to somehow turn the world gay. People did worry. Our only agenda is to make people feel good. It’s an hour of joy.

Your audience squeals with excited delight a lot. There are people from all over the world who wait three years for tickets. I was in Dubai and this woman said she’d been trying to get tickets for five years. That’s why I created the room [for] leftover people who can’t get in. Tom Hanks named it the Riff Raff Room.

You live a very public life with a lot of pressures, among them rumors of marital problems with your wife, Portia. I don’t pay attention [to rumors]. But we’ve been followed recently by the paparazzi, and we found out it’s because there’s a story out there that we’re getting divorced. We don’t know why. We’re together all the time. We genuinely love each other. Her happiness is my happiness, and vice versa. True love is caring more about the other person’s happiness than your own.