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## Tim Conway - The Good-Humor man

by Paulette Cohn

The family room of one of America's favorite funny men is paneled in dark, mahogany-stained wood, a stark contrast to the sunny comedy for which the star of McHale's Navy and The Carol Burnett Show is best known. Even more surprising is the news that Tim Conway bought the wood at the lumber mill, cut and installed the panels, then finished it all by himself.

"I have all my fingers," he quips, wiggling all 10 digits in his house in Encino, Calif. "It's the sign of a good carpenter."

Conway, 73, traces his handiness with a hammer to high school shop class, one of his favorite subjects because childhood dyslexia made it difficult for him to read.

"People thought that I was kidding when I would read out loud in school, so they started laughing," he recalls. "For instance, the book *They Were Expendable*, I read as 'They were expandable.' People were going, 'This guy is great! Expandable! What are you talking about, rubber people?'" Conway liked the response. "I thought, 'I must be funny, so I might as well continue with this.'"

### Wholesome entertainment

His ability to make people smile eventually led him out of Chagrin Falls, Ohio (pop. 4,024), to Hollywood and a successful career on television and in the movies. His early success on McHale's Navy led to a string of other memorable roles, most notably alongside Carol Burnett; Conway became a vital cog in Burnett's weekly comedy machine during the 1960s and '70s. Movies such as *The Apple Dumpling Gang* and *The Private Eyes* brought his career onto the big screen, and his series of highly successful "Dorf" videos, with Conway as a pint-size sports expert dispensing hysterically flawed how-to advice on golf, fishing and other activities, found him an even broader audience. All the while he was making America laugh, he was holding to a high standard of personal values that guided all his professional decisions.

"I've made it a point of never doing anything that you couldn't take the entire family to," says Conway, who says he isn't interested nowadays in the daily grind of another TV series, but that doesn't mean he is ready to be put out to pasture. He has a one-man show that he is considering taking on the road, and he and good friend and Burnett co-star Harvey Korman recently wrapped up eight years of Tim Conway and Harvey Korman: *Together Again*, a touring show in which they re-created their famous routines from *The Carol Burnett Show*. The grandfather of two continues work on faith-based DVDs for children, such as *Hermie and Wormie* and *The Rainbow Valley Fire Department*. He also works on other projects, such as the Nickelodeon series *SpongeBob SquarePants*, for which he provides the voice of Barnacle Boy.

"He is very much into his family," says Carol Burnett of her former co-star. "What I

love, too, is he sews. I have seen him make the most adorable outfits for his granddaughter. He could go into business making baby clothes and be one heck of a good success on the side."

### **A compassionate upbringing**

Conway, whose father was Irish and whose mother was Romanian, says growing up as an only child in Chagrin Falls was an idyllic experience. "Everybody not only knew about, but cared about you," he recalls. Such a caring upbringing created a compassionate man who has made it a point to do charitable work. For 25 years, he hosted the Spastic Children's Foundation Golf Tournament, and, more recently, he returned to his childhood love of horses, helping create the Don MacBeth Memorial Jockey Fund, which provides money to assist injured riders.

"He is as nice as he is funny," Burnett adds. "I have never seen an ounce of temperament. He isn't a comedian who has all these dark-underbelly problems."

An average student at Chagrin Falls High School, Conway later attended Ohio's Bowling Green University, where he majored in speech and dramatics, and minored in home economics. "My mother was a seamstress, so I took sewing classes and I was the only guy," he says with a smile. "It was great for dating, actually."

His idea of comedy at the time was taking jokes from a book to create a routine, and partnering with a friend to do funny bits for a local church and Friday-night pizza parties.

Following college graduation, Conway volunteered and served two years in the U.S. Army. Afterward, he returned to Ohio and went to work as a writer for KYW-TV in Cleveland. Within months he was performing with Ernie Anderson on the local comedy show Ernie's Place.

"Rose Marie (of The Dick Van Dyke Show) happened to come through Cleveland and saw me doing some stupid stuff, and said, 'Gee, that's really funny. I'll take it to Steve Allen,'" he says modestly about his big break.

### **Backing into show business**

Allen brought Conway to Los Angeles to appear on three episodes of his popular weekly television series in 1961, and it was only after he returned to his TV station job in Ohio that he was offered a part on a new sitcom, McHale's Navy. He initially turned the offer down, unsure that he wanted to make such a long-term commitment. "That's crazy!" said his boss at KYW, who encouraged Conway to return to Hollywood to enlist as Ensign Charles Parker.

"I backed into this whole business," he admits. "I wasn't really gunning to be in show business." Conway and his wife, Mary Anne Dalton, whom he met in college, relocated to Los Angeles, where they eventually raised six children: five sons and a daughter. Wanting his children to experience the same solid Midwestern values that had steered him, he "took them back to Ohio in the summer just to look at the cows and grass." It must have worked, because all of Conway's kids are gainfully employed and today they frequently drop by the house.

After McHale's Navy ended in 1966, Conway was tapped for a recurring part on The Carol Burnett Show, beginning a TV touchstone that would last for 11 years. But it was only during the last two years that he became a weekly regular. "One of the stupidest

things I have ever done in my life," Burnett admits. "The first nine years, Tim was on once or twice a month. Finally, we said, 'Why don't we have him on every week,' duh?"

Conway, divorced by this time, fell in love with Charlene Fusco, Burnett's secretary. In 1984, he married for the second time, adding a seventh child, a stepdaughter, to his family.

Not surprisingly, he says he has few regrets. "I think I'm most proud of the fact that in making people laugh, I didn't offend them," he says. "When I look back on my work, I don't think there's really too much to apologize for, maybe some bad acting along the way. But for the most part, nothing for which I'd have to say to a mother, 'Gee, I'm sorry I offended your kids.'

"It's been a pretty good ride. I've enjoyed every single moment of it."

Paulette Cohn is a writer in Valley Glen, Calif.

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