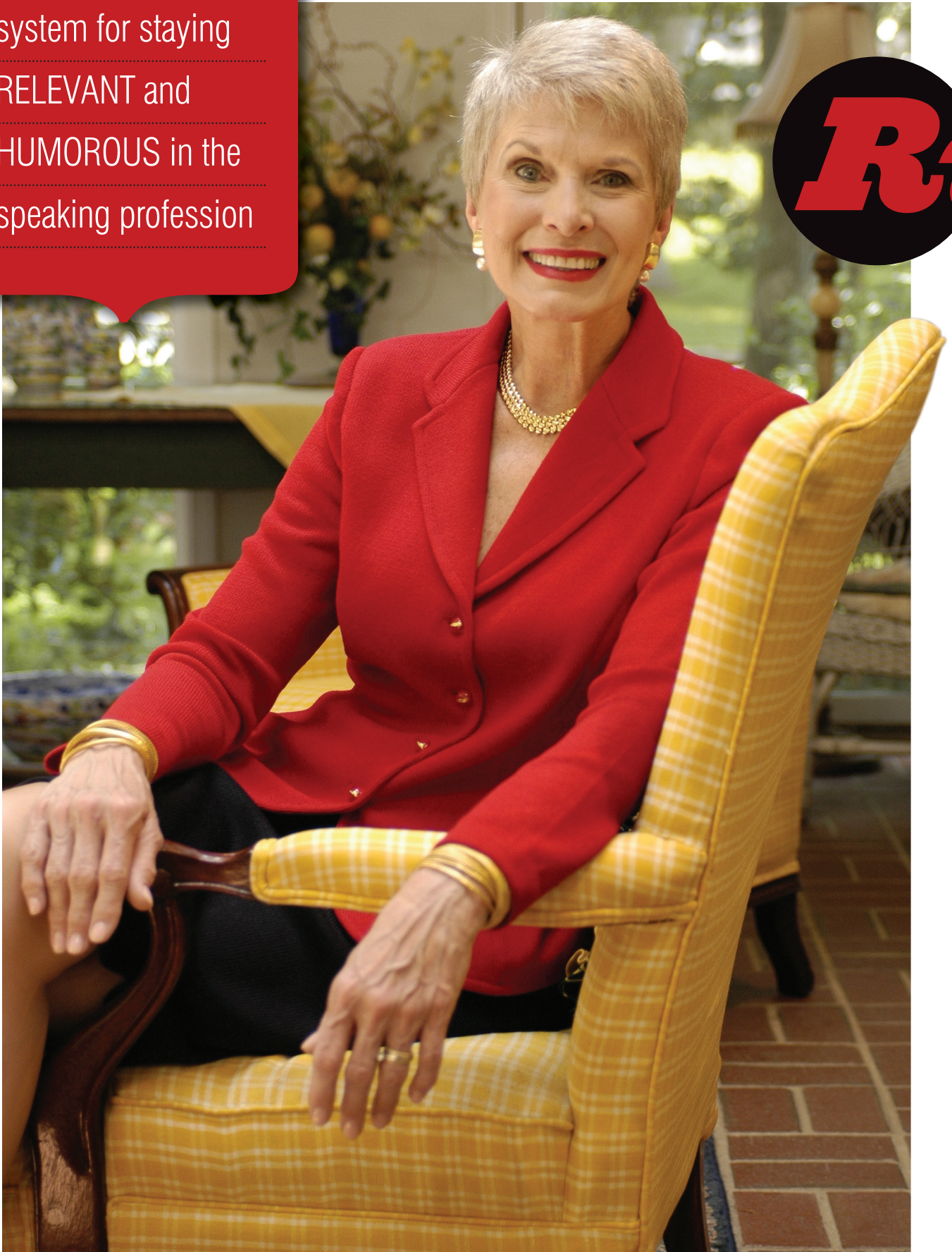


Jeanne Robertson's
system for staying
RELEVANT and
HUMOROUS in the
speaking profession

Ri



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By Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP, CPAE

**"I MAY NOT BE THE FUNNIEST PERSON
IN THE ROOM, BUT I'LL OUTWORK 'EM ALL."**

—Jeanne Robertson, CSP, CPAE, Cavett Award Recipient

That is the theme of Jeanne Robertson's life. As a humorist with more than 50 years of speaking contracts under her belt—or under her pashmina, as her SiriusXM fans would appreciate—Robertson has defied the odds. She has not only lasted longer than most in this business, she has remained relevant by using a successful system for continually updating her material—something she learned at a very early age.

EARLY LESSONS

In ninth grade, Robertson ran for student council treasurer. At age 14, she walked on stage with a pitcher of water and a glass. She poured the water, took a sip and said, "If you elect me treasurer . . . (sip) . . . I promise one thing . . . (sip) . . . I won't steal . . . (sip) . . . the money."

She turned and walked off stage. Oh, and she won.

In 1963, as a rising junior at Auburn University, Robertson won the title of Miss North Carolina and subsequently competed in the Miss America Pageant.

She didn't become Miss America, but was voted Miss Congeniality. Unbeknownst to her at the time, the year she served as Miss North Carolina was the turning point in her life.

Her daddy had always told her that if she was funny, people would pay attention. So, for the next year, Robertson gave more than 500 funny speeches all over the state, and her audiences quickly realized she could do more than cut a ribbon and smile.

The rest, as they say, is history.

A SYSTEM THAT WORKS

In January 2015, Robertson presented a session for the Colorado Chapter of NSA. She doesn't speak at Chapters often because her speaking and theater schedules are so busy. (Traveling 25 days a month during the busy season leaves her little free time!)

In her session, Robertson shared her humor-writing system, and attendees quickly realized that this system has one non-negotiable rule—you have to use it. Robertson's system is not complicated or sophisticated. But what it does require and what most speakers are unwilling to commit is, well, commitment. For more than 50 years, Robertson has committed to continually writing new material so that she can maintain her edge in a very crowded speaking, and now theater, market.

Karyn Ruth White, a successful comedian and speaker, attended Jeanne's session in Denver.

"I had gotten lazy with my writing because I knew I could rock the house with my current material," White says. "But it was obvious to me that Jeanne's excellence comes from daily diligence and dedication to her craft. The next day, I rented a writing office with the sole mission of rededicating myself to the craft of crafting humor."

Robertson's system can be boiled down to one sentence: *Pay attention to everything around you.* She explained the system in her book, *Don't Let the Funny Stuff Get Away*. Her husband, Jerry (aka Left Brain), originally inspired the system by challenging her to discover one funny thing every time she went out of the house. The book was inspired by her assistant, Toni, who was tired of explaining her process to everyone who asked.

The book is out of print now, but Robertson recently released an ebook to meet the demand for the information. (Go to www.amazon.com/Don't-Let-Funny-Stuff-Get-Away-ebook.) Here is a summary of her approach to humor.

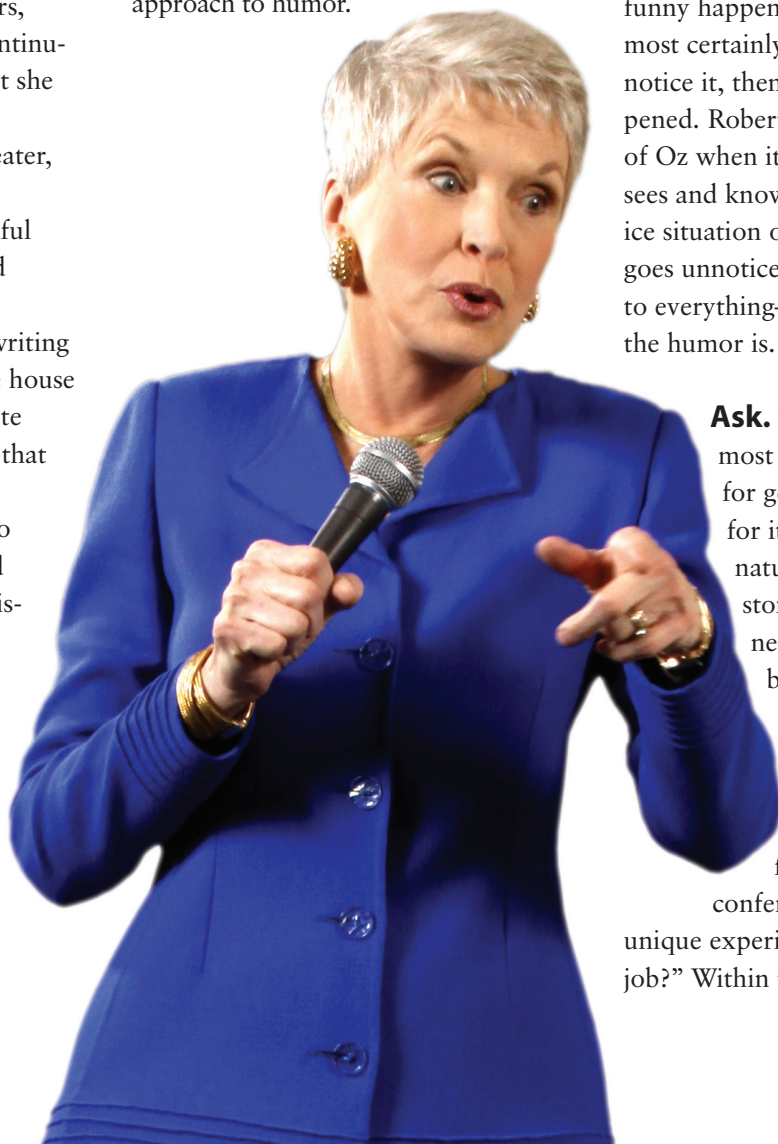
Discipline. If you are not willing to commit to the process, then put this article down and step away from the magazine. There is no value in a system you don't implement. So, first and foremost, commit to working the system every day.

Life is Funnier than Fiction.

Robertson knows that funny is found in real life. There is humor everywhere, and your job is simply to uncover it. Enlist help from friends and acquaintances and perfect strangers. Let people know that you want to know when something funny happens.

Look and Listen. Did anything funny happen today? The answer is most certainly, "Yes." But if you didn't notice it, then it's as if it never happened. Robertson is like the Wizard of Oz when it comes to humor. She sees and knows all. No customer service situation or casual conversation goes unnoticed. She pays attention to everything—because that's where the humor is.

Ask. This is probably the single most underutilized technique for getting material—asking for it. Robertson is curious by nature, and this leads to great stories. When attending dinner with clients the night before her presentations, Robertson doesn't talk about herself; she asks questions of everyone at the table. "Anything funny ever happen at this conference?" "What's the most unique experience you've had in your job?" Within the answers, Robertson



captures nuggets that become her hilarious stories.

One of the funniest stories she shared was when she once asked a bellman, “What is the funniest thing that happened to you in this job?” He replied, “You, asking me that same question last year.”

Write It Up. Every great writer will tell you that if you don’t write down your ideas, you will forget them. Robertson feels strongly about this and makes sure she writes down every bit of potential material when it happens. But here’s the catch—she doesn’t just write down an idea; she writes up a paragraph describing the situation and her thoughts about the potential for humor. Otherwise, when she goes back to develop the story later, the real-time impact of the experience is long gone.

Stretch It. This is the point where a good idea develops into a great story. Whether it’s combining material from different experiences or embellishing a story, Robertson explores the 200 to 300 ideas she has recorded each year and creates 20 new stories that will become fresh elements in her program. She typically works on her stories in December and January, when her schedule is slower. Then she hones them over the next year until they are stage ready.

Robertson says one of the problems many speakers face is that they don’t update their material often enough. She updates constantly, incorporating new stories into every presentation.

A Journal for Prompts. The foundation of Robertson’s system is her journal—simply a piece of paper with a list of prompts that remind her where



ROBERTSON’S SYSTEM CAN BE BOILED DOWN TO ONE SENTENCE: PAY ATTENTION TO EVERYTHING AROUND YOU.

material is found. The prompts include phrases like “transportation to/from the hotel,” “hotel/airline personnel,” “conference attendees,” etc. By putting these words on a page, it reminds her to recount when something funny may have happened throughout the day. You’d be amazed at how often this simple reminder will bring back a memory that you may have forgotten.

PROOF THAT IT WORKS

Last November, Robertson released her eighth DVD, which includes 16 new stories. The show was recorded in front of a sold-out theater in Burlington, N.C., and her assistant shipped out more than 10,000 DVDs in the first five weeks. At the age of 71, Robertson is selling out theaters across the country

with her one-woman show and continuing to remain relevant. The only way it happened for Robertson is with the discipline of her system and the talent that arose from that discipline.

These days, Robertson may still say she’s not the funniest person in the room, but for 50 years, she’s outworked everyone. And between you and me, I think she out-funnies them too.



Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP, CPAE, is a speaker, humorist, and author of Do it Well. Make it Fun. The Key to Success in Life, Death, and Almost Everything in Between. He served as 2012-13 NSA president.