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A Good, Clean Buzz

Alumnus Buzz Sutherland to perform at Family Weekend.

Story by Kelsey Allen

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It had been a rough day at football practice for Jeff “Buzz” Sutherland. After a devastating 51–6 loss to Oklahoma, the Tigers were put to work. And for a young walk-on, it wasn’t easy.

Dejected, Sutherland headed across campus to University Place to pack for Thanksgiving Break at home in St. Louis.

As he passed Jesse Hall, a long line formed on the steps. Had he missed a memo, he wondered? Was he supposed to be there?

As the mass of people took their seats in Jesse Auditorium, Sutherland approached a woman who was working and asked her what the fuss was about. A stand-up comedian, she told him. The show was sold out, but he could stand in the back with her.

“I don’t usually let people sneak in,” recalls Kathy Murray, who in 1985 was working part time for the assistant director of Student Life. “But he was so polite and earnest, I couldn’t say no.”

The lights in the auditorium went out.

Ladies and gentlemen, the University of Missouri welcomes Jerry Seinfeld.

“This kid walks out in blue jeans, a white T-shirt and a black jacket with the sleeves rolled up and says, ‘You know, football is a stupid game,’ ” Sutherland recalls. “The place went crazy because we had just lost to Oklahoma. I turn around and say to [Murray], ‘This guy gets paid to do this?’ ”

Suddenly inspired, he ran back to his room before the show even ended and told anyone he encountered on the way — including his best friend, Jim Allen, and the cute girl living one floor up, his future wife, Julie — that he was going to become a comedian.

A few months later, he was performing at Déjà Vu under the tutelage of owner Freddy DeMarco. After his very first gig, he was approached by a scout for HBO’s *Comic Relief*, a nonprofit charity organization that sponsored a four-hour televised event that raised funds for the homeless.



Buzz Sutherland will perform at Mizzou Family Weekend 7 p.m. Sept. 27 at Jesse Auditorium, the same stage where he was first inspired by Jerry Seinfeld to become a comedian in 1985. Photo courtesy of Comedy Productions.

“I had been a comedian for an hour and a half, and she wanted me to come to L.A. to be part of *Comic Relief* with Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams and Billy Crystal,” Sutherland says. “They said I was going to do an hour; I only had three minutes of material! But I pulled it off. When I came back to St. Louis, people thought I was a star.”

Sutherland started booking gigs regularly, and not long into his career, he was pulled aside by a mentor who gave him a piece of advice.

“I had long hair at the time, and he told me my facial expressions, which were the key to my show, were getting lost,” says Sutherland, who went to the closest barbershop and shaved his head. “He started calling me Buzz. I’ll never forget: We walked around this mall in Denver telling people they could rub my head for a \$1. I made \$38, more than I was making at night opening for the real comedians.”

And Buzz Sutherland was born.

Two years later, Sutherland was Seinfeld’s opening act on college campuses around the country. Today, Sutherland is known as one of the top college comedians. He has been named Comedian of the Year by the National Association of Campus Activities 16 times, and he is Déjà Vu’s most requested comedian.

“When he was playing the college circuit, I kept telling my students to book him for Family Weekend because he does good, clean comedy,” says Murray, who is now assistant director of campus activities for Student

Life. She didn't realize that Sutherland was the student she let stand in the back of Jesse with her more than 20 years ago. "I didn't remember him until I heard him tell the story [about seeing Seinfeld at Jesse] at Family Weekend in 2011. It wasn't as momentous in my life as it was in his.

"Comedy gets so ugly these days, and he doesn't do that," she says. "It's a testament to how witty he is that he can keep things funny and fresh without resorting to unsavory tactics."

Sutherland — who still lives in St. Louis when he's not performing on Celebrity Cruises, at corporate events or at any number of colleges — says he waits all year to get on stage at Jesse Auditorium.

"There is so much pride in Columbia, and I think the heart of that pride starts in Jesse," Sutherland says. "The big things happen at Jesse Auditorium, from orientation to graduation. For me, that very day at Mizzou in Jesse in 1985, I got my vocation and met the true love of my life."

He spotted that cute girl, Julie Crippen, who lived on the floor above him, while performing at a comedy club in St. Louis. He stumbled his way through the rest of his act and asked her out immediately after the show. They were married in 1993 and have a 17-year-old daughter, Payton, and a 14-year-old son, Sam.

Sutherland will perform at Mizzou Family Weekend at 7 p.m. Sept. 27 at Jesse Auditorium.

“When I see the quality of people they bring to campus, and to know my name is on that list, that’s a great feather in my cap,” he says. “When I get to bring my own opening act to Mizzou, I cut their time back so I can have more time on stage because as soon as the show ends, it’s 364 more days before I get to perform at MU again.”

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