

Healing Brokenness With Laughter

Chonda Pierce's personal testimony of enduring abuse, depression and the death of two sisters is anything but funny. Yet the Christian comedian has used it—and lots of genuinely hilarious material—to heal hearts through laughter for more than 20 years. She was recently named the top certified female comedian by the Recording Industry Association of America for having sold more comedy DVDs than any other comedian—secular or Christian. *Charisma* talked with Pierce about how she turned her pain into praise.

Charisma: Why did you decide to become a comedian?

Pierce: Sometimes I feel like comedy found me. But I also believe that it's the way the Lord works sometimes.

I got a job at a theme park in Nashville called Opryland USA. I was simply trying to pay my college bill. They gave me the part of impersonating Minnie Pearl. I fell in love with her and that character. I fell in love with the sound of people laughing. It's almost cliché now that we say laughter does good like a medicine, but for me it became medicine.

Charisma: What was happening in your life that made it such a means of healing?

Pierce: In about a two-year period, everything I knew, in terms of security, comfort and my foundation, had changed for me. My father was not a good person. He was not a consistent Christian man. He was very difficult to live with and difficult to be around as a child. That was my childhood.

Within a two-year period, my big sister was killed in a car accident—she was 20—and about 19 months later, my little sister died of leukemia. She lived only 21 days after being

diagnosed. Everything was such a whirlwind. My mother and I had to move out ... and find a new life. My father had eventually left the family.

They used to make a joke, "Well, you'll find out how saved you are when you share a bedroom with your mother." My mother prayed for me out loud every day—and I'm in the bed with her. Out of that great dysfunction came some really great material.

Charisma: You found Christ in the midst of your traumatic youth. How did that happen?

Pierce: There is no other explanation for having to survive the whirlwind life that I had than God [was there for me]. I didn't wind up on drugs or alcohol. I didn't wind up totally washing my hands of the church, which a lot of people do when they've grown up in such a difficult structure.

Laughter came along and became that soothing balm—just a healing oil for me—and it smoothed the edges of my life. ... In those years, there was healing, and I really committed my life to Christ. I got serious about the evangelistic side of what comedy could do, and I wanted to tell my story.

Charisma: Even after you were saved, you found yourself facing dire circumstances. What happened?

Pierce: I went through a tough bout with depression. I felt like I was filled with the Holy Spirit and making a great effort to walk with the Lord, and all of a sudden I got depressed.

If you're a stand-up comedian and someone diagnoses you clinically depressed, that'll throw a kink in your trunk. For the first time in a long, long time, I didn't feel funny. I didn't feel like God could use me. That's when I realized that my relationship with God was about who He was and not about how I felt.

The more I talked about the reality of what I'd walked through and where I've been—even in funny ways—the better I'd feel. The more I talked about the woman squeezing into Spanx and trying to feel pretty for a 30-year marriage ... you cannot avail yourself to authenticity like that and someone in the room not come up to you and go, "I have felt the same thing."

In comedy, the reason we laugh is because we feel a common denominator or a connection. And it's the same way when we are sharing our testimony or our story. —*Felicia Abraham*