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**JOHN CALLAHAN'S PELSWICK CARTOON
AND
A NEW PHASE OF DISABILITY HUMOR**

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A 13-year-old wheelchair user named Pelswick Eggert rolled into the world of children's television in 2000 on the "Pelswick" show on Nickelodeon. The Pelswick character illustrates how some TV images of people with disabilities are shifting to more equal and mainstream representations, as well as how disability humor is evolving. Cartoonist John Callahan, famed for his "politically incorrect," one-panel gag cartoons for adults, created the Nickelodeon cartoon show. No subject is taboo in his cartoons for adults, including people with significant disabilities. Callahan successfully makes biting statements about ableism in society because he is quadriplegic. Shultz and Germeroth (1998) analyzed Callahan's gag cartoons and described how they "provide a force of resistance by taking the stereotypes against persons with disabilities to a ridiculous extreme

and poking fun at the attitudes of those who cling to their status of able-bodiedness" (p. 242). This study of his "Pelswick" show analyzes disability humor in the TV series to reveal what it tells us about the evolution of this type of humor.

While Callahan downplays the "gag" style humor in his Nickelodeon cartoon, he continues to focus on society's ableism, rather than making fun of people with disabilities. For example, when a bully calls Pelswick a "cripple," Pelswick retorts that he prefers the term "permanently seated." True to Callahan's controversial style, the show confronts patronizing attitudes and political correctness. Callahan says he wants the cartoon to be entertaining: "Kids need a certain amount of rudeness and grossness." But he also wants to "show kids that people in wheelchairs are just like everybody else and want to be treated like everyone else" (Moore, 2000, p. C13). "Pelswick takes a no nonsense, see -things-for- what- they- are attitude and he demands to be treated normally. He doesn't look for sympathy, and he doesn't get any" (Petrozzello, 2000, p. 85).

This paper argues that Callahan's more subtle approach to disability issues in the cartoon series has persuasive power with its young audience because Pelswick's portrayal comes across as a smart, cool 8th grader who gets into the usual scrapes with his friends. "Pelswick" both normalizes and demystifies the disability experience for its audience. The show focuses on Pelswick's interactions with others and the world around him, not his disability.

We contend that the show's humor represents a new phase of disability humor because it includes all the characters. Most of the characters have no disability and much of the laughter is directed at them. When Pelswick becomes the focus of the humor, it, therefore, is normalizing because he is represented like all the characters. When the humor focuses upon his disability, it is Pelswick poking fun at himself. For example, Pelswick quips in an early episode about the dangers of a school-sponsored camping trip: "I'm the only one in the class who can't get accidentally paralyzed" (Nickelodeon, 2000). Business Week disability issues writer John Williams says Pelswick, as "the likeable rascal who easily finds himself in trouble, is far more believable than most past TV portrayals of wheelchair -using youths - helpless, docile, angelic wallflowers" (2000). As one media critic put it, Callahan "breathes bold honesty into Pelswick" (Baca, 2000).

In this article, we will analyze the "Pelswick" cartoon series to assess it as a new phase of disability humor, one that focuses on normalcy, equality, and "bold honesty." We will discuss the connection between disability and humor and look at the different phases through which disability humor passes.

HUMOR AND DISABILITY

Disability and humor have an uneasy relationship. Cultural codes of conduct tell members of many societies not to laugh at people who are physically different. Also, many non-disabled people who fear disability perceive having a disability as tragic, pitiable, or just plain sad. A disability organization's publication explains, "There is little that is intrinsically humorous about having a disability. Concomitantly, there is little that is inherently morose, sorrowful or tragic about having a disability. Many people in the community at large perceive disability with sympathetic and lamentable attitudes. Because of that, they resist or oppose attempts to juxtapose humor and disability" (Baum, 1998, p. 3). Albrecht says disability humor "raises a hidden paradox that makes people feel uncomfortable. What is so funny about having a disability when others think it is a tragedy? (1999, p. 67). Yet, historically, disabled people have been a source of amusement for non-disabled people. For example, individuals with disabilities were used as court jesters, exhibits

of curiosity in "freak shows," or as cartoon characters with comical speech and sight problems. "Most of us have experienced negative forms of humor where we have been laughed at rather than laughed with," explains a writer for a disability organization. Constructive (positive) humor "creates positive environments where people support each other, promote self esteem and create mutually beneficial connections. Destructive humor does the opposite" (Baum, 1998, p. 4).

Destructive humor sets disabled people apart by poking fun at what are seen as their inadequacies. There are genres of disability jokes and humor, just as there are ethnic jokes. One renowned disability genre is the Helen Keller joke. On the surface the jokes may seem mean-spirited by making fun of the famous deaf-blind woman. (Example: How did Helen Keller burn her face? Answering the iron.) However, joke scholar Barrick (1980) argues that the jokes grew from media attention given to Keller's life through the movie, "The Miracle Worker," and its subsequent rebroadcast on television, as well as new federal legislation in the 1960s that began to mainstream disabled children in public education. Barrick reports that Helen Keller jokes grew from the "sick joke" genre, which often targeted disabled people. (Example: What has 500 legs and can't walk? 250 polio victims.)

Humor scholar Dundes argues that the growing visibility of disabled people in society spawns joke categories that focus upon them. He explains that sick jokes about quadriplegics "attempt to recognize and articulate the public's discomfiture in the presence of armless, legless, or otherwise disabled individuals" (1987, p. 18). Barrick agrees, saying Helen Keller jokes and those about disability in general assist society in dealing with more visibly disabled people mainstreamed into society and the accompanying civil rights that people with disabilities demand. He says ethnic jokes have cropped up in the same way; for example, a rash of Jewish jokes cropped up after the "Holocaust" was broadcast on TV in the late 1970s. Other research has shown that the changing role of women in 19th century U.S. society was reflected in magazine cartoons; Johnson (2001) suggests "the social humor represented in these cartoons helps society process the changes that are occurring within it. . . .The irony depicted in humor may reflect society's early awareness of the tension between the status quo and the new" (p.2-3). For instance, in a cartoon from 1887, a woman president is surrounded by female judges, politicians and generals. From below the podium observing the inaugural are female soldiers, sailors and businesswomen. A lone man in the corner cares for a child (Johnson, 2001, pp. 172-3). Such cartoons reflected male concern for the growing independence and power of American women.

Barrick believes the Helen Keller joke provides a similar purpose in society. "Like a classical drama, it has had the cathartic effect of erasing the pity normally felt toward the disabled, so that the joke teller and his listener now accept these people on equal terms. . . .How can you hate someone who makes you laugh?" (1980, p. 449). However, Barrick's thesis does not account for those missing in the construction of the jokes or humor: people with disabilities. Helen Keller jokes and sick jokes about quadriplegics were created by non-disabled people for other non-disabled people. Without disabled people involved in the creation of humor, these jokes can be read as insulting and patronizing.

That's why John Callahan's humor, and that of other people with disabilities, truly revolutionizes disability humor. Callahan's humor merges sick jokes and disability themes, coupling them with the powerful message of being drawn by an artist with a disability. "This exploration of bad taste in disability imagery could be seen as the antidote to tragic imagery, mocking and teasing, instead of displaying misery," according to disability language scholar Jenny Corbett (1996, p. 53). Callahan

"confronts disability with a raw humor in newspaper and magazine [cartoons] that have drawn praise and condemnation, with people who have disabilities taking both sides" (Keveney, 2000, p. 5D). Other disabled humorists also have taken control of "sick humor." Sharon Wachsler, a cartoonist with chronic fatigue syndrome and multiple chemical sensitivity, on her Sick Humor web site, wrote, "As I was confronted with the daily frustrations, indignities, and peculiarities of life with chronic illness, I started drawing cartoons that depicted my experiences -- transforming my anger into comedy." Most disabled humorists believe they get their messages across when their work is both hated and loved.

However, disabled humorists must contend with the legacy left by Helen Keller jokes and sick humor - that these jokes and humor are for children or insensitive adults. Most adults "know better" than to laugh at such things. Fred Burns, a disabled comic, noted, "The thing I found from the beginning is that when you're disabled, unlike other comics, audiences don't want to laugh at you. They're taught all their lives not to make fun of handicapped people. That was the challenge - to get them to laugh at their concepts of people who are disabled" (Coddon, 1996, p. 8). Rick Boggs, a blind actor and performer, says a focus on disabled people as inspirational, or only in the context of a serious subject, means society does not get to see the diverse qualities of people with disabilities - especially that they like to laugh and have fun just like anyone else. Boggs tried to counteract this in a series of cell phone commercials in which he told the audience of the virtues of cell phone service from a chilli dog stand, a museum, a Las Vegas wedding chapel and behind the wheel of a convertible, which was hooked up to his friend's tow truck. Boggs says, "There are a lot of roles out there that portray how admirable people with disabilities are, but we need more like my character, someone who's not only capable, but fun. Someone you'd really want to know" (Tillotson, 1997, p. 1F).

An international disability organization, Rehabilitation International, reports that when done correctly humor can build bridges between disabled and non-disabled people. Kolucki (1994) says humor is a good way to convey "messages concerning the assumptions that non-disabled people make about life with a disability or people with disabilities. Humor is a bridge over the awkwardness many people feel when approaching a new or unfamiliar situation" (p. 9). She also suggests messages received through humor are remembered longer than those presented without.

Additionally, humor has long been a way for many groups to confront oppression. A number of ethnic and social groups have used humor as a way to protest against those who would put them down. Simmons (1963) identifies seven forms of protest humor among oppressed groups:

First and most basic is the belief that personal salvation is to be found strictly within the group and that acceptance of the customs of the majority group will lead to heavy personal loss. The second utilizes a favorite form of retaliation, the trickster motif, whereby a minority member scores by countering a specific insult delivered by a member of the majority. Third, a parody is devised against an alleged somatic or cultural image. The fourth logically follows the majority group's thinking but twists the conclusion to allow for the minority group to escape. The fifth derides the majority group by either depreciating its high status, demonstrating the inferiority of a majority group member, or disclosing how the majority member actually feels toward the minority. Sixth, the close relationship between the minority group and a prized majority personality is emulated but mimed. Last, the entire scene is reversed so that the

images appear topsy turvy and the minority group emerges triumphant (Simmons, 1963, as quoted in Boskin, 1979, pp. 46-47).

Some disability humor mirrors type five in which cartoons in disability publications attack the helping and health professions by illustrating how little they understand about the disability experience. For example, the disability rights publication, *Mouth*, regularly runs cartoons by Scott Chambers, who often confronts the medical profession. One of his cartoons shows a doctor at a mental hospital extracting a patient's brain, saying, "You won't need this any more!" Chambers mocks the views of some mental health professionals who believe they always know best, even when it hurts the patient (Chambers, 2001). The "Pelswick" cartoon embodies some of type-seven protest humor because Pelswick usually triumphs over his nemesis Boyd, the bully. But, Callahan's "Pelswick" also has moved past overt protest humor toward a humor of equality -- the disabled character is equal in status and humor to all the other characters.

Others have established the healthful benefits of humor. Many people with disabilities have incorporated humor into their worldview to cope with the barriers they often encounter in society. Many newly disabled wheelchair users "incorporate humor to aid in the healing process and many are able to laugh at themselves and their situation," according to Sheridan's analysis of disability in the media. (Sheridan, 1996). Humor among people facing problems indicates high self-esteem, according to a laughter expert (Morreall, 1983). "When the person with a sense of humor laughs in the face of his own failure, he is showing that his perspective transcends the particular situation he's in, and that he does not have an egocentric, overly precious view of his own endeavors. . . . It is because he feels good about himself at a fundamental level that this or that setback is not threatening to him" (1983, p. 106). Humor is a good method to cope with even horrific situations, from concentration camps to the September 11 attacks. "Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation," according to Auschwitz survivor and psychotherapist Viktor Frankl (quoted in Morreall, p. 104). When confronting an event like Sept. 11, 2001, "humor is a release from the restraints of our personal powerlessness in confronting that evil" (Melendez, 2002, p. D1).

John Mythen, who created Claude, a cartoon character who is a wheelchair-using dog with multiple sclerosis, says, "Humor is good for the body and soul" (Claude's world, 1998b). Sally Greenwood, director of the MS Society of Canada, says, "Through his book 'MSing around,' John touches on many delicate issues surrounding MS and opens doors to further communication" (Claude's world, 1998a). Carol Sowell says in a muscular dystrophy publication, "Laughter makes you stronger. No, it won't cure your neuromuscular disease, but it helps you master the things you can control - your own attitude and, sometimes, other people's reactions" (1996). For John Callahan, too, cartooning became a way for him to vent his frustrations, as well as laugh at the world that does not easily accommodate a person with quadriplegia.

CALLAHAN AS SPOKESMAN FOR DISABILITY HUMOR

A car crash paralyzed John Callahan from the chest down at the age of 21. He retained limited use of his arms and learned to draw using his left hand to apply pressure and the right hand to guide the pen. For about 20 years, Callahan has been known for his biting and controversial gag cartoons. He produced a number of cartoon books, numerous magazine cartoons, and a well-received autobiography, *Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot* (1990). He has managed to anger many groups with his work, from feminists to disabled people. However, he remained steadfast in

his cartoons' assault on political correctness. Callahan says, "America's got this horrible political correctness thing. I'm like a vulture feeding off political correctness" (Tilley, 2001). Callahan says of his topics:

I've never been the kind of cartoonist who is interested in cartoon themes like pets, dieting, the boss at work, etc. Life to me is major league, and I'm drawn to the aspects of it that typify the struggle: death, disease, insanity, feminism, tragedy, disability, etc. Though my work also includes themes of sweetness and frivolity, I'm afraid I've been cruelly and unjustly typecast as sick and twisted. Let it be known that I have never once answered any of the 'lively' letters aimed at me. Except once, when I could no longer abide the criticism that 'Mr. Callahan could not possibly understand the struggle of someone with a spinal injury' (1998, p.65).

His insightful work fits with a 1918 statement about the mission of someone who draws cartoons: "The cartoonist makes people see things" (Hess and Northrop, 1996, p.82). Despite the controversial nature of his work, or perhaps because of it, Callahan's following grew. His cartoons and his notoriety as a quadriplegic cartoonist are now seen as moving disability humor forward.

For example, *The Miami Herald*, which carried Callahan's work in its Sunday magazine in the 1990s, reported: "When we get complaints about his handling of the subject of disability, they are almost always from people without disabilities themselves. And whenever we hear from the physically disabled, individually and through organizations promoting their interests, what we hear is loud and enthusiastic applause" (Callahan, 1998, p. 89). Commenting on a cartoon showing a spinal cord injury center with a notice on the door saying "standing room only," the *Miami Herald* editor said, "The truth is you shouldn't have to know that Callahan himself is disabled to realize that his cartoons are not 'poking fun at the handicapped.' The reason why our disabled readers love Callahan is that they don't misread him." The cartoon doesn't make fun of wheelchair users. "Here's a clinic specifically designed for the disabled - presumably run by able-bodied doctors who don't understand the needs of the people they serve. Standing room only. The joke's on those of us who *can* stand" (Callahan, 1998, p 90).

Callahan's work has helped change some of the disability stereotypes that the disability rights movement has long tried to challenge. Callahan's cartoons, while controversial, are evidence of the "slashingly dark humor" (Martin, 1997, p. 1) used by disability activists attempting to challenge and transform "ablest" conceptions of disability. In his own unusual and bizarre way, Callahan is confronting attitudes about people with disabilities. "Whereas ableists have used quadriplegic jokes to exert social control over persons with disabilities (Dundes, 1987), Callahan's gag humor serves as a cultural release of anxiety by engaging in a dialogue about disability and actively aggressing against an ableist perspective" (Shultz and Germeroth, 1988, p. 233).

Having reached primarily adults with his humor, Callahan began to turn his attention to kids with the development of "Pelswick." "I've spent my whole career trying to do a style of cartooning that is really honest. And I think that is what kids are about," Callahan says (Keveney, 2000, p. 5D). He says Pelswick Eggert is different from all the other cartoon characters because not only does he use a wheelchair but "because of his spirit, his worldview. He sees things the way they are. He's fearless, extremely funny and doesn't define himself with this disability" (Moore, 2000). "Pelswick isn't anywhere near as rough as Callahan's print cartoons, but the show bears a healthy helping of its creator's irreverent edge," according to *USA Today* (Keveney, 2000, p. 5D). The series is

"infused with the same wry sense of humor about living with paralysis as fills the artist's collection of cartoon and kid's books, including his autobiography," according to the *New York Daily News* (Petrozzello, 2000, p. 85).

"Pelswick" both normalizes and demystifies the disability experience for its youthful audience. "Through Pelswick, Callahan can share with viewers his thoughts on kids and disabilities" (Moore, 2000). Callahan says, "I have a philosophy that all kids are created equal and they all have their challenges" (Moore, p. C13). The focus of the show is on Pelswick's world as a kid in middle school, not his disability. Pelswick "is a typical 13 year-old navigating the treacherous teen years - only he does it from a wheelchair" (Keveney, 2000, P. 5D). He refers to his wheelchair as an SUV, Spinal Utility Vehicle. The series focuses not on the fact that he is permanently seated (uses a wheelchair) but on the daily life and difficult issues of growing up, his very funny and fearless personality, his amusing friends and family. Issues tackled by the show include: censorship, the rights of disabled people, boy bands, the Pokemon trading card craze, Pro wrestling, and reality TV. "These are probably the 'issues' that take up more cafeteria conversation than any others these days. And they all get skewered on 'Pelswick'" (Zillions Online: "Pelswick").

As a character, Pelswick "refuses to let his disability cripple his life" (Perigard, 2000, p. 055), and this is an innovative new direction in the presentation of a disabled kid on TV. Pelswick is the first physically disabled cartoon character with his own TV series (Time for Kids, 2000). Nickelodeon TV, which shows "Pelswick", reports that the network's goal is to show more diversity in children's programming. "'Pelswick' is part of Nickelodeon's goal of reaching out to all young people," according to a Nickelodeon vice president (Goode, 2000, P. B3). Those who report on the cable industry say Nickelodeon has led the way on inclusion, "producing scripted and non-fiction programs with diverse casts" (Miller, 2001, p.33). "Inclusion has quietly and successfully been embraced by a different group of networks: cable's family programmers" (Miller, 2001, p. 33). Diversity matters to viewers, according to these cable networks. With "Pelswick's" premiere on October 24, 2000, cable gained the first disabled cartoon character written by a disabled cartoonist. The show is now carried on Canadian TV, UK's Channel 4, and in fall 2002, the show moved to American TV's CBS Saturday morning line-up.

Most TV critics and children have received the show well. "'I think (Callahan's experience) gives it authenticity and integrity that allows him to go boldly where he wants to go,' says Cyma Zarghami, Nickelodeon's Executive vice president. She does say she would feel uncomfortable with 'Pelswick's' humor if the creator weren't in a wheelchair" (Keveney, 2000, p. 5D). However, Callahan does not want special treatment from critics because he is quadriplegic, "although he says his experience gives him insight about disability." Arts critic and disabled actor Neil Marcus says Pelswick has "major disability cool." "He's a regular kid, with what I thought were very well placed or balanced character traits. For example, disability seems to be the least of his problems or concerns. Should it be his main concern? No! After all, this is the new millennium and Pelswick is interested in... living" (2000, p. 1). As the disability rights publication, *Ragged Edge*, says, "Pelswick" "totally gets it right about crippdom. Who says you can't laugh at quads? Callahan shows how to do it the right way" (October 25th, 2000). One media critic says, "Nickelodeon is changing the face of TV. And the skin color tones. And the physical capabilities. ... Nick has made a commitment with its recent schedule by putting ethnic minorities and people with disabilities in leading roles" (Baca, 2000). As mentioned, "Pelswick" contains a myriad of characters, most of whom are not disabled. Their character traits are delineated in the next section.

"PELSWICK" BACKGROUND & CHARACTERS

Pelswick Eggert, (the voice of Robert Tinkler) is a 13-year-old boy who is a power wheelchair user. Like his creator, he is quadriplegic, paralyzed below the armpits due to a car injury. Both Pelswick and John Callahan have some limitations in the use of their hands. This leads to Callahan's unique drawing style of shaky lines and somewhat misproportioned character features. Pelswick always has one eye drawn about twice the size of the other. "Pelswick' inhabitants have that mutant-bordering-on-grotesque look. In chinless Pelswick - who has golf ball eyes, a cucumber mouth halfway down his neck - Callahan is transferring to TV a kid who surfaced from time to time in his syndicated cartoons, but was not in a wheelchair" (Rosenberg, 2000, p. F1).

Callahan came up with the name Pelswick after seeing it in an old movie and Eggert comes from Callahan's love of Humpty Dumpty (Moore, 2000). He says, "I've always had an obsession with Humpty Dumpty. I relate to his cockiness and of course his ignominious demise" (Callahan, 1998, p 71). Pelswick likes music, enjoys his friends, gets into trouble, get bullied, likes adventure, plays jokes on his friends, has a healthy suspicion of authority, draws cartoons, has irreverence for school, is bright and has a sharp tongue. In keeping with cartoon tradition that characters usually have only one outfit (Wagner, 2002), Pelswick wears red and white sneakers, a red baseball cap worn backwards, a purple/blue T-shirt with a red chest stripe worn over a long sleeved white shirt with baggy blue pants. He has red hair and freckles and a long nose.

Although named after Pelswick, the show features about 10 other characters prominently. Interestingly, another member of Pelswick's family also has a disability. His grandmother, Gram Gram, Pricilla Eggert (the voice of Ellen-Ray Hennessy) uses a walker. She has been described as "a tough love Gram Gram - a crazy old lady who rides a skateboard with her walker in tow" (CNN, 2000). Because Pelswick has no mother, she functions as the mother figure in the Eggert household. Nickelodeon's "Pelswick" web site says: "She can't hear or chew very well, but she'll introduce you to the pavement if you mess with Pelswick. This is a lady who played fullback for her high school football team. Who enjoyed a successful career as a professional wrestler. Who digs hand gliding, skateboarding and scuba diving in the lobster tank at the super market. And who has been known to fully immerse herself in mud, Green Beret-style, in order to spy on and ambush bullies who mess with Pelswick. Pelswick's grandmom is one tough old bird."

Pelswick's father, Quentin Eggert (the voice of Tony Rosato) is an "oh-so sensitive" (Keveney, 2000), politically correct college professor, who allows Callahan to continue his humorous attacks on political correctness. Quentin always tries to see both sides of an argument, to never offend anyone, to respect everybody involved and to never say anything mean or opinionated (Nickelodeon, 2000). A typical comment from Quentin: "This is my chance to be creatively proactive, while respecting the unique personhood of my enemies and remembering that nobody's wrong, they're just differently right."

Pelswick has two siblings. Little sister Katie (the voice of Tracey Moore) is the typical pesky sister who always gets in his way. She is a pest who has a great sense of humor and likes to play practical jokes. Bobby Eggert is Pelswick's two-year-old brother. He doesn't talk much and speaks in one-word sentences. He spends most of his time in a baby carrier hanging from his dad's chest. He wants to be just like Pelswick.

Pelswick also has two best friends, Ace Nakamura and Goon Gunderson. These friends are both supportive of Pelswick and dependent upon him because he is the brightest one in the group. Ace

Nakamura (the voice of Phil Guerrero) is intelligent and full of obscure facts and references. He likes to ride on the back of Pelswick's wheelchair as they speed down the hills in their San Francisco neighborhood. Ace appears to be Japanese American. Goon Gunderson (voiced by Peter Oldring) is not the brains of the group but despite his "hulking size and dim-bulb status, Goon is actually a sweet, gentle and sensitive giant"(Nickelodeon's "Pelswick" web site, 2000). Goon is a loyal friend to Pelswick but his first love is professional wrestling. In the episode "David and Goonliath," he achieves his life's dream and faces a real pro wrestler, despite Goon's noticeable lack of talent.

Other friends include Julie Smockford (the voice of Julie Lemieux), who is the object of Pelswick's affection. Although she remains just out of reach, Pelswick is always trying to get her attention. Julie's best friend is Sandra Scoddle (voiced by Kim Kuhteubl). Like Julie, she is bright, funny, strong willed and independent. She is very similar to Julie, and they have many fights. They can be enemies one minute and great friends the next. Sandra differs from Julie only in that she's usually annoyed by Pelswick's antics. Sandra is African American.

Pelswick also has a type of guardian angel who no one else can see. His name is Mr. Jimmy, described as a "white haired bearded magical mentor" (Moore, 2000). Mr. Jimmy is meant to remind one of ZZ Top guitarist Billy Gibbons and is voiced by actor David Arquette. Mr. Jimmy serves as a moral compass for Pelswick (Petrozzello, 2000) and through a series of bizarre stories helps Pelswick work out the answers to the many problems he faces. Arquette says he likes the types of issues the show tackles. "Taking on the role of Mr. Jimmy allows me to have fun working with the creative wit of John Callahan, while raising kids' and parents' social consciousness of important issues," he said (Premier's council, 2001).

One of Pelswick's biggest problems is the school bully who seeks him out for daily harassment. Boyd Scullarzo (voiced by Chuck Campbell) bullies Pelswick in a variety of ways, from competing in wheelchair races, even though he doesn't use a wheelchair, to teasing Pelswick when he listens to a "boy band" to get closer to Julie. However, even as school bully, Boyd won't hit Pelswick because "you can't punch a kid in a wheelchair," he says in one episode. So Boyd resorts to verbal abuse. Pelswick counters Boyd and his gang's abuse by "turning their mean spirited high jinx against them" (Petrozzello, 2000). Pelswick and his friends attend Alcatraz Junior High in San Francisco. The school's Principal Zeigler (voiced by David Huband) also plays a role in the show. He is a kindly but nervous and absent minded. Generally, he could be described as "clueless."

AN ANALYSIS OF DISABILITY HUMOR IN "PELSWICK"

"Pelswick" is rich with humor, but interestingly, as noted previously, much of it is not disability related. This analysis focuses only on the disability related humor, which was revealed by transcribing four episodes. The first three discussed had only a few references to disability topics, so much of the analysis focuses on the episode, "Draw," which mirrors an incident in Callahan's own life. These four episodes were randomly selected from the episodes Nickelodeon was running in spring 2002.

In the "Brain Sucker of Skuldeath 5" (episode four in season one), Callahan pokes fun at children's obsession with Pokemon. Pelswick initially makes fun of his friends' addiction to the cards and other Skuldeath paraphernalia, but then he gets sucked in to the mania. Julie, the girl he likes, and Boyd, the bully, make fun of him. In the end he breaks free of the card obsession by

facing the bully. The episode has no disability humor, but the story depicts Pelswick as "normal" as he falls into the same obsessions as many other children.

In "Ntalented" (episode seven in season one) the show turns its attention to boy bands and the love that young girls heap upon them. The object of Pelswick's affection, Julie, is enamored of the boy band, Ntalented. He believes he can win her heart if he shows interest in the group and helps her get tickets for their concert. This episode has a partial disability theme during the concert scene because a security guard approaches Pelswick and says, "You are in a wheelchair." Pelswick says sarcastically, "That's very observant of you but I already knew that." The security guard explains: "Fire regulations. You're blocking the aisles. I have to move you up to the side of the stage." The turn of events makes Julie ecstatic because the move will bring her closer to the beloved group. However, Pelswick complains, "I object. I'm a paying citizen." But Julie drags him off, happy for the change. She is now closer than her best friend, Sandra, which appeals to her competitive side. The two girls miss most of the concert due to their squabbling over the seating arrangement. This episode says much about disability. The episode gives Pelswick a sexual identity as a young teen trying to win the affection of a girl. Secondly, the incident at the concert shows that Pelswick, like many disabled people, does not want to be treated differently, treated as special, or sit in a segregated area. Thirdly, it shows the positive side of being friends with a disabled person - that sometimes it works as an advantage to get better seats or treatment.

"The Wheel World" (episode eight in season one) satirizes TV's reality shows when a visiting TV producer selects Pelswick to star in a "day in the life" reality show. It also shows the young target audience how TV can manipulate reality; Pelswick's family is re-tooled and replaced by a more appealing group and Pelswick's name is even changed to "Lance." This episode does not have much disability specific humor, but it does show Pelswick playing basketball with his friends and taking care of his personal needs on his own. His character is not shown as "special" or different in any way.

An episode that focuses upon a disability theme primarily and mirrors John Callahan's life is "Draw" (episode three in season one). The episode begins with Gram Gram cooking, which results in the family getting food poisoning. While sick at home from school, Pelswick draws cartoons about his family's illness. One cartoon becomes the focus of the episode when it becomes a topic at school.

The episode also contains much of the "gross out" humor that kids like, e.g. Pelswick's father puking in the toilet, flies sitting on hamburgers, and students studying the human digestive system. It also has a sub-text about non-disabled people's abuse of handicapped parking spaces.

When Pelswick returns to school he runs into Ace and Goon near a hamburger stand. They notice a hip, muscular blond young man pull into a handicapped parking space and hop out of his Jeep, obviously not disabled. Goon says, "Well, he looks pretty good for a guy in a wheelchair." Ace exclaims: "What a jerk." The cook at the hamburger place swats a fly that he then secretly adds to the blond man's burger. Pelswick removes the lug nuts from two of the Jeep's wheels, saying, "It's OK for him to park there. After all, he's handicapped." As the blond man drives off, two wheels fall off. Pelswick then discusses his conflicted view of handicapped parking: "When you think about having a special place to park just because you can't walk, it's pretty funny. After all you don't have people with bad taste park closer to the clothing store." Pelswick then draws a cartoon of himself in the Jeep.

Pelwick goes back to school and continues to draw. He creates a cartoon of a horse sitting in a wheelchair. He runs into his friend Julie at school. She is upset because she is editor of the school newspaper and her front-page photo fell through after bees at the flower show stung the photographer. She hysterically tells Pelwick about all of this and asks to see his cartoons for the paper. She selects the cartoon of the horse in the wheelchair, saying, "This will do. It's funny." Pelwick is happy because he has a crush on Julie and she has been nice to him. "You rock," Julie says.

Back at home, Pelwick tells his family that his first cartoon will be published in the student newspaper. Pelwick daydreams while brushing his teeth that he's famous and all the girls want his autograph. Mr. Jimmy appears from the toothpaste tube. Mr. Jimmy has the school newspaper a day early and says his favorite part is the cartoon on the front. He says the cartoon reminds him of the work of Voltaire and Havel. Pelwick doesn't know who they are and is told to look them up.

In school the next day, Pelwick thinks that the newspaper has been sold out early because he can't find any around. Goon, Ace and Pelwick celebrate by singing and dancing because Pelwick believes he is now famous. But Julie tells them that the newspaper has been banned because of the cartoon. The vice principal condemns the cartoon as politically incorrect. The vice principal interviews Julie about "the insensitive thug who drew this cartoon." He says, "This so-called cartoon demonstrates a disturbing lack of sensitivity towards our differently-abled friends. I was personally offended." A teacher adds, "I was offended too." Others agreed. One said, "My face almost fell off." Julie, however, protects Pelwick and will not reveal that he drew it. "Before I compromise my journalistic integrity by revealing my sources, I'll perish under the hot, hot burning blazing sun," Julie says to the vice principal, who glows bright red from a sunburn.

Julie tells her friends she's been suspended because she won't tell the school who drew the cartoon. "When I signed on as editor, I swore an oath to protect my sources," she says. She tells Pelwick never to tell anyone that he drew the cartoon. The local media pick up on the story. Typically, the local TV news report, "News Natural," smiles about disasters, but the program reports the incident at the school with intense seriousness. The reporter says the impact of the offensive cartoon made "bullies so upset weak skinny kids had to beat themselves up." A schoolteacher notes that school isn't a place for humor and fun. Pelwick realizes no one has seen his cartoon, so he circulates the cartoon via the Internet. The media find it and sensationalize it. Pelwick believes when everyone sees the cartoon they will like it and the school will apologize to Julie. Many people secretly laugh at the cartoon but publicly criticize it to remain politically correct. For example, the news anchor is seen laughing on air, but he says, "I've just been handed the most disturbing piece of artwork."

Finally, Gram Gram gives Pelwick's secret away by marketing his cartoon on mugs and T-shirts. She turns up at the school with a cart selling the merchandise. When the school realizes that Pelwick drew the cartoon, everyone's attitudes change. Pelwick tells the vice principal he must punish him for the cartoon. But the vice principal says, "As long as a differently able person drew it, where's the harm?"

The cartoon becomes very funny when Pelwick is discovered as the author. He confronts this and proclaims others to be hypocrites to think it is funny now that they know a disabled person drew it. He fights to be punished just as Julie was, so Pelwick gets suspended as well. As Julie prepares the next newspaper issue, she asks Pelwick to help. She says she will put it on the web so she

can't be silenced. "I've recorded the whole ugly event for the next issue," Julie says. Her headline: "Publisher suspended, artist silenced."

The episode shows Callahan's own experiences with misinterpretation of his disability-themed cartoons. Many people reject his cartoons when they do not know a person with a disability drew the cartoons. They felt they were not PC, which is what Callahan has dedicated his life to confronting. Also, the "Draw" episode supports freedom of expression and speaks to the fact that American children and teens have less freedom of expression than adults because of the 1988 Hazelwood vs. Kuhlmeier Supreme Court case, which ruled that high school newspapers can be censored by administrators.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

What does the "Pelswick" cartoon show us about disability humor? The most important thing it tells us is that even when a cartoon show has a main character with a disability, it need not focus solely on disability humor. "Pelswick" at its core is a show for pre-teens, and as such it combines a certain gross-out humor with important messages about the moral and ethical issues kids face. The humorous situations and in-depth messages are portrayed through all the characters equally - Pelswick, his friends, family, and the school personnel. Pelswick is just a regular member of this cast of characters, who just happens to use a wheelchair.

We argue that disability humor has passed through three phases in the 20th century, and that with John Callahan's humor in "Pelswick," it has entered a fourth phase. Phase one was categorized by freak shows and using mentally disabled people as representative "fools." Phase two was represented by sick jokes, quadriplegic jokes, and Helen Keller jokes, which made fun of people with disabilities and emphasized their "limitations." In phase two, non-disabled people created the jokes and humor about disabled people. The third phase is characterized by people with disabilities taking control of the humor message. It represents the surge in number of disabled cartoonists such as John Mythen, Sharon Wachsler, Scott Chambers, and John Callahan, and the prominence of disabled comics such as deaf comedian Kathy Buckley and Fred Burns, a professional comic with spina bifida. These disabled humorists poke fun at society's barriers and their own place in a world that has pitying or negative attitudes toward them. Callahan's humor is some of the most vehement in this vein because he takes on patronizing and pitying attitudes by protesting any form of political correctness in his gag cartoons for adults. This phase of disability humor doesn't just go for the laugh; it allows non-disabled people to see issues related to disability in a different light.

Callahan's more subtle approach in "Pelswick" ushers in a fourth phrase of disability humor, one that illustrates an integrated approach rather than a disability-focused approach. In this phase of disability humor, the person with a disability is just another character in the humor landscape. The humor does not focus upon the person with a disability and much of the humor has no disability theme at all. This is the true innovation of "Pelswick" - disability is just part of the diverse humor panorama, not the reason for the comedy.

Within the third and fourth phases of disability humor, the power of the disabled cartoonists and comics is crucial. For non-disabled audiences to properly "read" the humor, they must understand that disabled people created it. If this is not understood, the humor is seen as cruel, rather than funny. Callahan explored this problem in the "Pelswick" episode, "Draw." Pelswick's cartoon in the episode was considered to be offensive publicly until it became known that a disabled person

drew it. With that information, the cartoon suddenly became acceptable. This mirrored Callahan's own experience as a cartoonist -- many of his cartoons were read as funny only when it became widely recognized that he uses a wheelchair.

If phase two of disability humor represented a discomfort with people with disabilities gaining rights in U.S. society, such as in the Helen Keller joke cycle (Barrick, 1980), then phases three and four illustrate that the increasing visibility and integration of people with disabilities in society, which allows audiences to feel comfortable with humor that includes disability. This form of humor created by people with disabilities for all audiences challenges stereotypes and builds bridges to understanding. Pelswick, through his equal status with all the other characters in the show, sends a message to young viewers that having a disability does not mean someone cannot have a full, interesting and exciting life. Pelswick's humor, love of life, and full involvement in all activities depicts him as a "normal kid." He is a fully participating member of his community and family. "Pelwick" illustrates disability humor at its best - everyone can laugh at our shared human experiences, and having a disability is depicted as just another unique feature about human beings.

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