

# DELIVERING LAUGHS

Physician delves into the ‘learned skill’ of improv comedy

By Jon Bell  
For The Scribe

**Peter Banitt, MD, FACC**, has been a cardiologist for more than 25 years. He earned his medical degree from the University of Iowa, did a residency at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston and was a cardiology fellow for three years at Brigham and Women’s Hospital. He’s practiced as an interventional cardiologist in Portland for the past two decades and feels right at home, completely comfortable even, treating patients with the most complex of cardiac complications.



Put him up on a stage in front of an audience of strangers and ask him to perform an improvisational sketch, however, and that’s when the nerves really kick in.

“Being on stage is unfamiliar territory for me,” said Banitt, who’s currently a cardiologist with **The Oregon Clinic** in Tualatin. “I am less nervous taking care of an acute myocardial infarction patient than I am on stage sometimes.”

And yet, getting up on that stage and performing improv comedy is just what Banitt has been doing – and

enjoying – for the past four or five years, ever since his wife encouraged him to take a class at a comedy club in Portland.

“It’s definitely a fun diversion,” he said. “I tell patients that if laughter is the best medicine, nothing is better than having a few laughs, literally, and being a supporter of live theater at the same time.”

Raised in a medical family – his mother was a nurse and his father was an internist – Banitt said he almost always knew that he would grow up to be a doctor. He was drawn to the dynamic, multifaceted nature of cardiology and so pursued that area of specialty in his studies.

Banitt met his wife, now Susan Pease Banitt, while he was in Boston. The couple moved first to Tacoma and then to Portland about 20 years ago.

A performer and dancer in her younger days, Pease Banitt had been looking to get back into performance, which led her into the local improv scene. That, in turn, resulted in Banitt giving it a try with a class at a club called ComedySportz in Portland about five years ago. He’s since taken many classes, dabbled in different clubs such as Curious Comedy and Deep End Theater, and now rehearses and performs on a regular basis with his team at ComedySportz.

Not to be confused with standup comedy, which typically involves a



Peter Banitt, MD, FACC, right, performs improvisational comedy last year with Alan Baird. Banitt said he and his comedy counterparts don’t usually perform in costume, but this was for a special Halloween performance. Photo courtesy of Peter Banitt

single person getting up on stage and running through a series of memorized jokes, improv comedy is just as the term suggests: unrehearsed and spontaneous. It usually features a group of performers who take the stage and throw together a short, humorous sketch based off a random suggestion from an audience member.

Banitt said one of the basic fundamentals of improv comedy is known as “Yes, and . . .”, meaning that one performer accepts what another has said and then builds on that for the next piece of the sketch.

“You create from that principle who the characters are, what the relationships are, why they are there and so on,” he said. “You try and build toward a crescendo and an ending.”

Though the performances are all spontaneous and unplanned, there are certain skills and talents that performers can hone for better improv, thus the classes that Banitt takes. Listening, for example, is key, as is responding to your partner and agreeing with them rather than shutting them down. You also have to develop relationships and learn how to build scenes on the fly with other people.

“When you see it and it’s funny, it looks effortless,” Banitt said. “But it’s actually a learned skill like playing the piano.”

Though he has some performance experience in his background – he played trombone and has sung in multiple choirs – getting up on stage was new for Banitt – and something that was out of his comfort zone. But all in all, it’s been beneficial to him.

Much of improv is also in direct opposition to how physicians provide care. In medicine, Banitt said, you’re constantly following rigid guidelines and procedures aimed at producing

similar results time after time.

“In improv, it’s the opposite,” he said. “There are no guidelines. It’s different every time, and you can fall flat on your face. It really is a different mindset than work. It’s kind of uncomfortable at first, but it’s fun and it’s really expanded my horizons.”

At the same time, there are certain aspects of medicine that sync well with improv, namely the relationship building and connections made with other people.

“In improv, the best scenes are where you are closely connected to your scene partner, you’re agreeing and complementing each other,” Banitt said. “That’s good for life and work and anywhere, really.”

And like anything, the more you do it, the more natural it becomes.

“Improv can be anxiety-provoking, but you just trust yourself and your partner and use the skills you’ve learned – and I still have a lot to learn,” Banitt said. “As with medicine, it’s like you walk into whatever procedure and once you’ve studied it and done it a few times, it becomes more comfortable.”

As for ambitions beyond the improv stage in Portland, Banitt said he’s not really seeking the limelight in New York City or Hollywood. For one, he’s got a family, a day job and other pastimes, including horseback riding. He’s also happy with the improv path he’s been on and where it’s led him thus far.

“I enjoy my day job and do not aspire to move to New York and join Saturday Night Live,” he said, “but I do wish to keep making people laugh here in Portland with my improv friends and colleagues . . . I like meeting new people who are into creating community and who are fun to be with.” ■

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