



Show creator Jeanie Linders

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Must-See Musical Celebrates "The Change"

—By Noelle Robbins

You may be a member of one of the fastest-growing women's clubs in America and not even know it. Five thousand women join every day, some as young as age 35, and its ranks are expected to swell to 20 million in the next decade.

What kind of sisterhood is this? It comprises those women lucky enough to share the joys and sorrows of a definitive life passage: menopause.

Menopause: lucky? The very thought of what's euphemistically called "change of life" often conjures up images of sweat-drenched nights, foggy-brained days, the collapse of sexual desire, and in fact, the collapse of just about everything else. Not exactly most women's idea of a great time. However, thanks to a self-appointed "Club Cheerleader," menopause has become a genuine reason for celebration.

Meet Jeanie Linders, the one-woman creative dynamo behind the national phenomenon,

Menopause The Musical, an event brimming with high spirits and baby boomer hits.

Linders has been called the woman "who let menopause out of the closet." But, as she confesses, when it came to her own transition she was totally clueless. She still can't quite believe some of the less-than-ladylike behavior she displayed during her years of hormonal upheaval. For example, once she found herself on the phone with a well-known Hollywood producer, her employer at the time. "I was yelling at the top of my lungs and I didn't even consider it abnormal. Ten years later I look back and wonder, 'What was I thinking!'"

Seeking the counsel of an older and wiser woman, Linders wrote to her mother for advice: "When did you go into menopause? How old were you and what was it like?" Linders' voice rises as she continues: "Four weeks later I get a late night call: 'It took me 10 years, my head wasn't connected to my body.' And I'm like, 'Ma?'" Her mother plunged ahead: "If you wanted to know about menopause, that was it." Linders' response? "Okay then, thank you for sharing."

Women in the San Francisco Bay Area can be grateful that Linders' less than comprehensive introduction to menopause proved to be her inspiration for the creation of Menopause The Musical. Linders had assumed that all women were as vocal as she about hot flashes, but discovered that menopause for many women was still very much, as Gail Sheehy described, a "silent passage." However, Linders also realized, "This isn't like our mother's generation — that once you hit menopause you then retired, then you sat on the shelf and had grandkids and died."

Linders wrote Menopause The Musical precisely to give a voice, and a song, to women undergoing this inevitable passage. The message of the show, that "it's not just the change of body function; it's the change of an entire attitude," has resonated with enthusiastic crowds in major U.S. cities including New York, Los Angeles, Orlando, Detroit, Boston, and Denver, over the last five years.

Menopause The Musical has also been translated for performances in Mexico, Israel, the Philippines, and Korea, striking a universal chord with women across a broad social spectrum. "There are women wearing diamonds and there are women wearing plastic jewelry from K-Mart," says Linders. But before you get the impression that the audience is exclusively full of wild midlife ladies letting off a little hot-flash steam, Linders says, "Husbands are dragged into the show but, once they are there, they love it. They sit there elbowing their wives saying, 'That's you on stage, for God's sake. You ought to be up there dancing with those women.'"

The four characters in the show — Power Woman, Soap Star, Iowa Housewife, and Earth Mother (local actresses Kathleen Antonia, Lisa Robinson, Kelly Ground, and Cindy Goldfield, respectively) — are personalities most women can identify with. They sing and dance their way through reworked baby boomer classics such as "I Heard It Thru the Grapevine, You No Longer See 39," and the disco hit "Stayin' Awake! Stayin' Awake!"

According to Linders, who single-handedly created these new takes on old favorites, her most challenging song was an ode to the mother/daughter relationship: "I'm No Babe,

Ma," set to the Sonny and Cher hit, "I Got You, Babe." As Linders puts it, "No matter how old you are, you're still your mother's babe. Women who have lost their mother email me and say, 'I can't tell you how much that song meant to me.'"

Linders also takes very seriously the role the show can play in supporting women's health. This September, special performances in cities across the nation, including San Francisco, will raise money for ovarian cancer detection and treatment.

"When ovarian cancer is found early enough, the survival rate goes from 25 percent to 90 percent. Ovarian cancer now is where breast cancer was 15 years ago."

Linders' goal is to raise awareness and funds and, in the process, give women with cancer an opportunity to laugh during what is an extremely stressful experience. "We talk to 25,000 women a week, through show performances," says Linders. This presents the perfect venue for distributing potentially life-saving information.

When all is said and done, Linders would like women to embrace becoming members of the Menopause Club.

"We don't call it a life celebration for nothing. My whole approach to life has always been to celebrate every step I'm going through. Menopause is just another step on the path."

And a great excuse for a little cutting loose, singing and dancing with Menopause The Musical.

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