



THE BLADE

One of America's Great Newspapers

50 CENTS • 66 PAGES

TOLEDO, OHIO THURSDAY, MARCH 16, 2006

FINA

TODAY'S QUOTE

"Nearly all our disasters come from a few fools having the 'courage of their convictions.'"

Coventry Patmore

TODAY'S CHUCKLE

The greatest laborsaving device ever conceived of: tomorrow.

PEACH PLUS

THE BLADE, TOLEDO, OHIO

THURSDAY, MARCH 16, 2006

SECTION D, PAGE 11

Actor takes fate in his own hands

David Lander speaks out about the struggles of living with multiple sclerosis

By HEATHER DENNISS
BLADE STAFF WRITER

From 1976 until 1983, television viewers could always count on Andrew Squiggman and his sidekick, Lenny Kosnowski, to barge into the apartment of Laverne DeFazio and Shirley Feeney, always at the most inopportune moment, always with an annoying "Hello!" and always to a good laugh.

A year after the popular *Laverne & Shirley* ended, multiple sclerosis barged into David Lander's life, and this time, the actor who played Squiggman wasn't laughing.

"I caught a real bad flu in Mexico," Lander said from Los Angeles during a telephone interview. "The flu was gone, but there were little things, like my gait wasn't quite right or I would collapse on the sidewalk."

Then one day he got out of bed and couldn't walk.

At that time in 1984, the doctor who diagnosed the actor

with MS had nothing encouraging to tell him, simply because there was nothing encouraging to say.

"The only thing you can expect is that it will get worse. You will never walk again," the actor said he was told.

The doctor was wrong. Lander will be the guest speaker at the Women Against MS luncheon at noon today at Gladieux Meadows, 4480 Heatherdowns Blvd.

Lander has given many talks to fellow sufferers about his life with the disease; a few times he's even talked about it in Toledo. But, he said, this time he will speak to people who don't have the disease but probably know someone who does.

"I'm talking to people on the other side," he said.

He's not sure what he's going to say to these women. Perhaps he'll tell them that MS is two to three times more likely to strike women than men, or that



David Lander played Squiggman on *Laverne & Shirley*.

people are usually diagnosed from ages 20 to 50. Perhaps he'll tell them about research

developments, including the drug Tysabri, now undergoing rigorous clinical trials.

Surely he'll relate his own struggles against the perceptions most people have of the disease and the physical limitations imposed on him by it.

He does know, he said, how he's going to open his talk before his Toledo audience: "First thing I'm going to do," he said, "is to thank them for being against MS."

Lander hasn't always been so open about MS, which is now believed to be one of several autoimmune diseases that attacks the central nervous system and is chronic, often disabling. More than 400,000 people in the United States alone have been diagnosed, and worldwide, it rises to 2.5 million, according to the National MS Society.

For 15 years, he tried to hide his diagnosis, often explaining his neurological problems away by saying he had been in a car

crash or letting people believe he'd been drunk.

"You'd try to find something," he said. "If people think you have MS, they may feel sorry for you, but they don't hire you."

So for 15 years, Lander hid his disease from everyone except his wife, Kathy. Finally, in 1999, he wrote *Fall Down Laughing: How Squiggman Caught Multiple Sclerosis and Didn't Tell Nobody*.

"I think I was getting tired of keeping it a secret. The worst thing was talking about MS and having to say that I had a friend who had it. I thought it could do more good to come out."

Lander knows he has physical limitations, although he said sometimes he's not certain which symptoms are from his MS or because he's now 58, not 26.

There are some things he had been certain he couldn't do,

See LANDER, Page 13

Lander

Continued from Page 11

such as run on a treadmill, that he's found out that he can. "I had to get a heart attack to find that out," he said. "The mindset is that you assume there are so many things you can't do, you handicap yourself."

While Lander no longer appears in a hit TV show, he still maintains a hectic schedule, doing movies, including *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *A League of Their Own*, and *Used Cars*, as well as TV roles and voice work.

He's also a baseball scout, and when he's not working for the Seattle Mariners, he scouts the baseball stadiums, trying to determine how friendly they are to people with disabilities.

He's working on another book that focuses on living with multiple sclerosis, and he visits cities and communities on behalf of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society to get the word out that having MS isn't a death sentence anymore. In 2000, the society honored him as Ambassador of the Year.

Those roles, he said, are more creative and rewarding than his acting career, even when you count the greasy-haired pest he played so long ago.

David Lander will speak at the Women Against Multiple Sclerosis luncheon at noon today in Gladieux Meadows, 4480 Heatherdowns Blvd. Tickets are \$50 from the MS Society, 419-897-9533.

Contact Heather Dennis at:
hdennis@theblade.com
or 419-724-6083.