

Melissa Peterman, effervescent actress and TV host, returns to the Valley for a third year to put on the gloves for the fight against Parkinson's disease

KNOCKOUT FOR CHARITY

Melissa Peterman is one busy woman—mom, standup comedienne, and currently hosting the second season of CMT's *The Singing Bee* after years of adding her warmth and comic talent to the hit series, *Reba*. But Peterman didn't hesitate when asked to return to the Valley to join a talented lineup of dedicated celebrities for this year's Celebrity Fight Night.

Celebrity Fight Night was developed by long-time Arizona resident and businessman Jimmy Walker in 1994 in hopes of raising money for local charities through a celebrity charity event. Since its inception, Celebrity Fight Night has raised nearly \$60 million to benefit the Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center at the Barrow Neurological Institute, as well as numerous other charities.

The event originally featured comedy celebrity boxing matches, but has since evolved into dinner, an auction and a multi-performer concert event with a "living room" feel. Executive director Sean Currie says, "It's very intimate, very casual and fun for the audience to experience these performers in a setting that they just wouldn't be able to do if they went to an arena to watch one of their shows."

Peterman credits close friend Reba McEntire with getting her involved with Celebrity Fight Night. McEntire is returning this year for her fifth time, and will once again host the event, which honors featured guest Muhammad Ali. Peterman and McEntire will actually be on tour together this spring and Peterman explains, "This is how important the event is to Reba—she fixed the tour schedule around the event. We'll be in Canada and we'll fly into Arizona for [the event] and then we're going to fly right back to Canada to finish the dates."

She always looks forward to her time with McEntire, confiding, "I would consider her one of my best friends...we just have

fun together. We really laugh a lot together...and there's never a shortage of good times when we're together."

Celebrity Fight Night for Peterman is about more than spending time with good friends and extra perks like meeting Jon Bon Jovi. "I was introduced to Jon Bon Jovi and I don't want to brag, but he did kiss me on my cheek...I about fell over. That was pretty great."

Heartthrob smooches aside, Peterman's dedication to the event stems from a more personal connection to this cause. Her brother-in-law was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease several years ago, and this will be his second year attending the event.

When they learned of the diagnosis, Jimmy Walker and other event organizers made special arrangements for Peterman's relatives to meet with Muhammad Ali's specialists when they are here for Fight Night, and she has been incredibly touched by this opportunity. "That's how committed everyone is to this thing, it's like it could be a huge, giant thing where they're going to raise \$4 million...but then on the personal, small scale they are just as generous. I'm indebted and grateful to all of them."

Peterman goes on to say, "I told Jimmy Walker, 'I'll come down to Celebrity Fight Night and I'm a really good waitress. I did that for years. I will vacuum and sweep'...I will do whatever they wanted me to do because they have been so great to me personally."

Don't look for Peterman to be slinging plates at the event, though. She'll be performing standup comedy, which is a more recent pursuit for the actress. Although she describes it as "terrifying," she goes on to explain that she loves it because, "it forces me to use a muscle that is different from when you're doing improv, it's different from when you're acting—it's just such a different animal."

continued on page 78



Actress Melissa Peterman makes it a priority to attend Celebrity Fight Night each year.

McEntire gave Peterman her opportunity to develop her standup skills by offering her the opening spot on her tour with Kelly Clarkson in 2008. "I'm so grateful that I got the opportunity with Reba, because it forced me to do something that I'd talked about forever and really wanted to do."

Peterman writes her own material, which comes from her family and everyday life. "You write what you know. You write what you see, and what you think is funny." She modestly quips, "So far no one's dragged me off the stage, so I think it's working."

It must be, because she'll be taping an hour-long comedy special on CMT which will air in March and also be produced as a CD.

Although she sees the humor in parenthood, this dedicated mom admits that it has changed her life. "Definitely, your priorities are different. I don't want to be away from home very much anymore. I'm sort of a homebody and people are always kind of surprised by that." She says she's lucky to have a husband who is flexible and can pick up the slack at home with their almost 4-year-old son, Riley, if a great opportunity comes up for her. As a performer, schedules can be up and down, but Peterman sees this as a positive. "Riley has had his mom and dad with him since he was born. It's a weird schedule, but it allows for a lot of family time, which is great."

Peterman had the chance to really get to know Scottsdale as a family destination during her first Celebrity Fight Night experience three years ago. She's looking forward to spending more time here, explaining, "You can't beat the natural beauty and the weather. Scottsdale has great things for adults to do and fun things for the kids to do, as well. It's a five-star city with a relaxed attitude."

Of course, the event allows Peterman, who describes her uniform as "jeans, either tennis shoes or Uggs, and a T-shirt," the chance to get glamorous. "Celebrity Fight Night is a great excuse to do it up big—you never know who's gonna be there!" Although she might be scanning the crowd for Jon Bon Jovi, she's looking forward to a night of looking great with her husband, confessing,



"I get dressed up more because of what I do than he does, but for me it's more fun to see him dressed up...I kinda like reminding myself that my husband looks damn good in a suit!"

With items like a stay at a Tuscan estate for up to 32 people, dinner with NBA star LeBron James or international superstar Andrea Bocelli, and a Tony Hawke customized Jeep Wrangler on the auction block, Celebrity Fight Night hopes to continue its success in providing the most entertaining experience as possible for guests, while raising as much money as possible. Peterman is thrilled to be a part of all of it, sharing, "It's an exciting evening to just even be in the room when the bidding's going on and you can see all this money being raised for such a great cause."

Celebrity Fight Night XVI will be held on March 20 at the J.W. Marriott Desert Ridge Resort & Spa. For more information, visit www.celebrityfightnight.org or call 602.956.1121.

Wendy Rubicam Evans is a freelance writer and marketing consultant in Scottsdale. Visit her at www.rubicamwriting.com.