

# Fall Down Laughing

David L. Lander on Squiggy, MS, and the Importance of Humor

BY LINDA CHILDERS

David L. Lander has spent most of his entertainment career making people laugh. Twenty-three years after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), that sense of humor is very much intact.

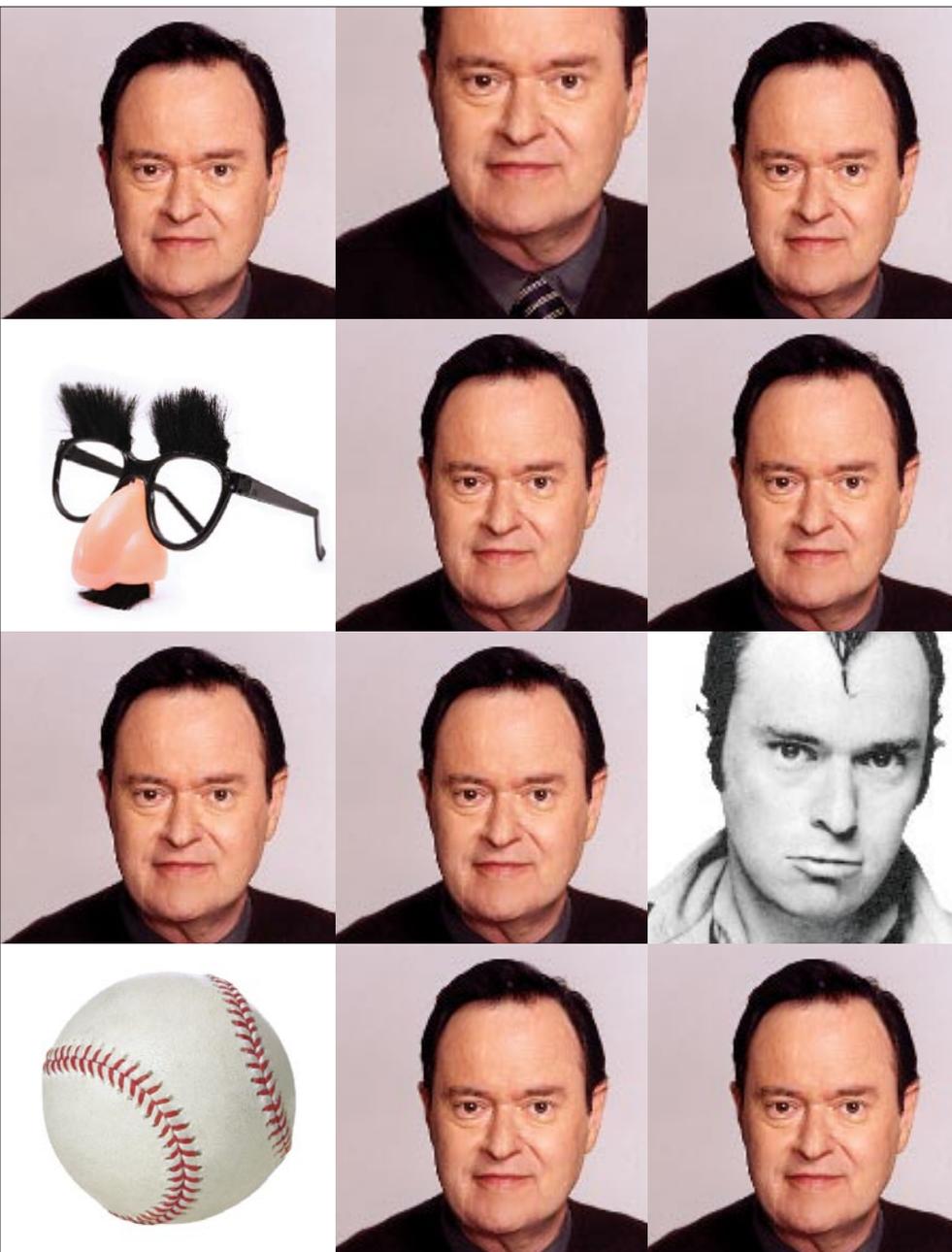
We first met Lander as Andrew “Squiggy” Squiggman, a comic truck driver for Milwaukee’s Shotz Brewery, and one of the stars of the 70’s sitcom, “Laverne and Shirley.”

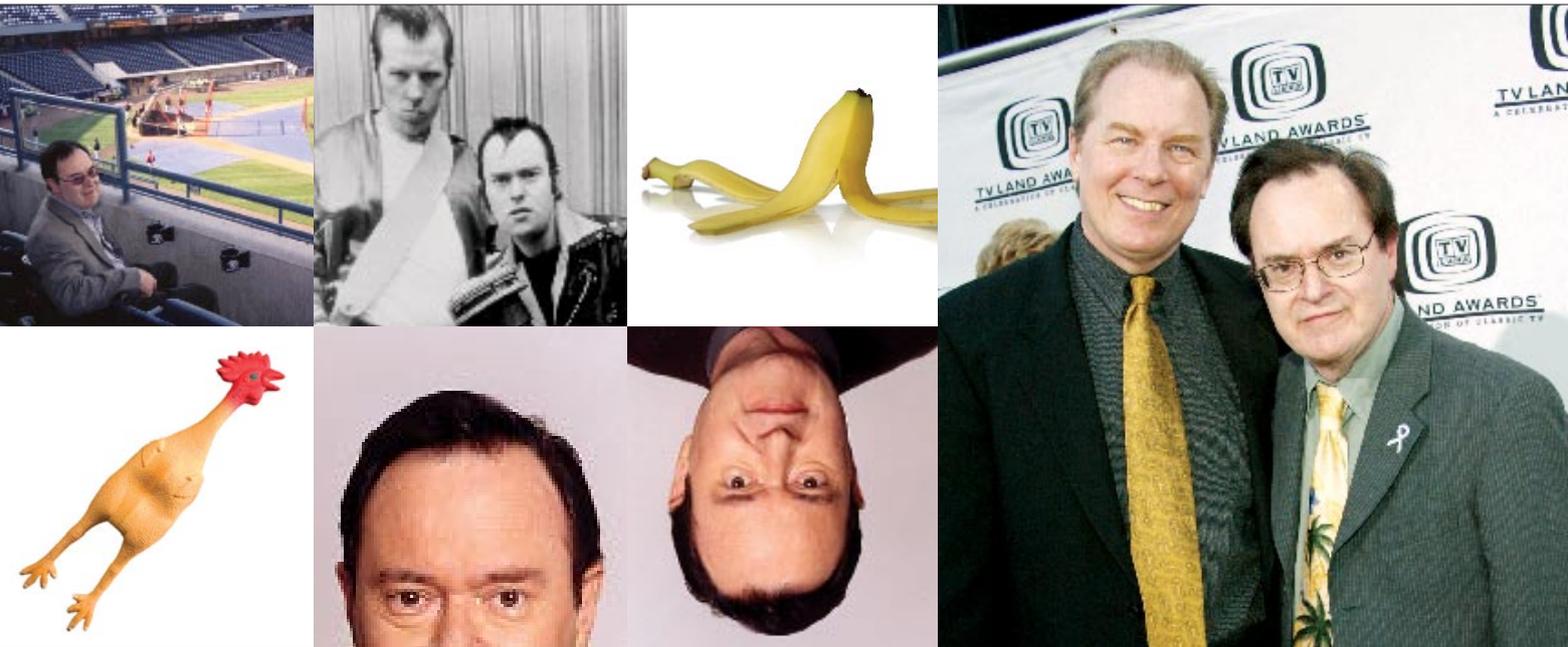
Shortly after he finished filming the show, Lander began experiencing vertigo and numbness in his hands and feet. “I remember having difficulty holding a glass,” Lander says. “When I dropped the glass I’d laugh it off and attribute it to being clumsy.”

After undergoing a spinal tap, doctors diagnosed Lander with MS in 1984. Known for his wit and humor in front of the camera, Lander kept his diagnosis a secret off-screen. He feared that no one would hire him in the competitive world of show business if they knew he had MS. For 15 years, Lander didn’t tell anyone but his family.

That all changed in 1999, when he revealed he had MS to his fans in his book, *Fall Down Laughing: How Squiggy Caught Multiple Sclerosis and Didn’t Tell Nobody*.

Filled with celebrity anecdotes, the book takes the readers inside Lander’s “journey with MS”—his forays with





everything from exercise programs, to support groups, to alternative medicine in an effort to improve his condition. Lander also discusses the importance of early diagnosis and treatment.

“Acting is all about confidence and having MS can mean losing your confidence,” Lander says.

By all appearances, however, Lander has not lost it—at least not completely. An ardent baseball fan since he was a child, Lander acted upon his lifelong passion for the sport in 1981 by buying 5 percent of the Portland Beavers, then a Class AAA affiliate of the Pirates. Today, at 60, he serves as a scout for the Seattle Mariners baseball club. He combines his love of baseball with his commitment to increasing awareness of MS.

**I**n 2000, the National MS Society named Lander one of their National Ambassadors. He now tours the country five to six times a year to promote early intervention and treatment for people newly diagnosed with MS.

“When I was first diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, there was nothing you could do about it. Doctors would say, ‘diagnose and adios,’” Lander says. “Now, there are many treatments available to control this progressive disease.”

Lander tried different treatments including intravenous steroids and then oral prednisone, before beginning the medication interferon-beta 1a (Avonex) more than twelve years ago. He now takes the medication once a week and says it has been helpful in slowing the progression of his disease.

When Lander talks to audiences about his life with MS, he likes to open with a quip: “People make statements these days that just don’t hold water,” he’ll say. “Well, I have multiple sclerosis, so neither do I.” Lander is on to two things about MS: Bladder problems are common, and it helps to keep a sense of humor about them. He admits the heat can also make his symptoms worse and tries to stay away from hot, humid climates.

“Most people have no idea what MS is,” Lander says. “One of the first things people asked me after I went public with my MS was ‘Does this make you one of Jerry’s kids?’”

Lander credits his own family—wife, Kathy, and daughter, Natalie—for being his own support system. Kathy, he says, was there when his doctor first diagnosed him with MS.

“My doctor painted a fairly bleak picture of the disease, even going so far as to tell me I probably wouldn’t walk again,” Lander says.

Over the years, Lander has learned that his doctor’s diagnosis wasn’t exactly accurate. Yes, he has MS, but he also leads a very full life.

In addition to his scouting work for the Seattle Mariners and work for the National MS Society, he evaluates and publishes candid reviews of handicap accessible areas in different ballparks on his website, [davidlander.com](http://davidlander.com).

He walks slower than he once did, has moved to a one-story house that he claims is “more MS-friendly,” and admits his memory isn’t as sharp as it once was, a not too uncommon complaint among those with MS.

“But are my memory lapses because of MS or because I’m 60?” Lander asks with a laugh.

What he does know is that he isn’t allowing the disease to slow him down. He is currently working on developing a television show about his life with MS, and is contemplating writing another book.

Speaking to MS patients is one of his greatest joys, he says, adding: “There’s a great strength that we derive from each other. Support groups offer MS patients an invaluable resource.”

That resource has also given Lander a valuable perspective on living with MS. “Whatever happens, MS can’t take it all. I will always have my heart and soul, my wit and wisdom,” he says. “Wherever the chips may fall, if I fall with them I will make it a point to do so gracefully—and laughing.” NN

*Linda Childers is a health writer whose work has appeared in More and ePregnancy.*



For more information about MS, see **RESOURCE CENTRAL** on page 47.



## UNRAVELING THE MYSTERIES OF MS

**M**ultiple sclerosis, or MS, is thought to be an autoimmune disease of the central nervous system. This means that the body, through its immune system, launches a defensive attack against its own tissue. In the case of MS, the body attacks myelin, the fatty tissue that surrounds and protects the nerve fibers. The destruction of the myelin—a process called demyelination—causes inflammatory scars or lesions along the nerve; multiple sclerosis literally means many lesions. Demyelination disrupts the ability of the nerves to conduct electrical impulses to and from the brain, producing symptoms of the disease.

### THE SYMPTOMS

Early signs of MS include:

- sensory problems (numbness or tingling of a body part)
- weakness
- fatigue
- difficulty walking
- blurred or double vision, color distortion, or blindness in one eye
- problems with coordination

Other symptoms might also develop later during the course of the disease:

- bladder problems
- bowel problems
- sexual dysfunction
- cognitive difficulties
- pain
- depression

### TYPES OF MS

MS can affect people in different ways—ranging from a course that is relatively mild to one that can be more disabling. People can expect one of four clinical courses, each of which might be mild, moderate, or severe.

**Relapsing-remitting:** flare-ups (also called relapses, attacks, or exacerbations) that impair neurological function. These are followed by partial or complete recovery periods free of disease progression. Approximately 85 percent of people have this form of MS at the time of their diagnosis.

**Primary-progressive:** a slow but nearly continuous worsening of disease from the onset, with no distinct relapses or remission. This is a relatively rare form; about 10 percent have it, and there are occasional plateaus and temporary minor improvements.

**Secondary-progressive:** initial periods of relapsing-remitting MS, followed by a steady worsening of the disease, with or without occasional flare-ups, remissions, or plateaus. Approximately 50 percent of those with relapsing-remitting MS develop this form within 10 years of their initial diagnosis.

**Progressive-relapsing:** a steadily worsening disease from the onset with clear acute attacks, with or without recovery. This is relatively rare; approximately 5 percent have or develop this form of the disease.