

TV Close-Up: Bill Engvall

by Eirik_Knutzen

Almost 30 years ago, a beautiful girl named Gail was resting a knee she had sprained in a skiing accident on a coffee table during a fraternity mixer at Southwestern University in Dallas when Bill Engvall - a strapping 6-footer - roller-skated into the room with a beer in his hand.

BILL ENGVALL - Bill Engvall is the force behind 'The Bill Engvall Show,' a gentle half-hour comedy he helped create, develop and executive produce. CNS Photo courtesy of Danny Feld. He immediately hit on the lovely coed with a well-rehearsed comedy riff before asking her for a date, but she didn't care for his approach and told him where to go - by himself.

Engvall dropped out of college shortly thereafter with no degree to show for his five majors in five years on campus and began spinning records in upscale nightclubs. It must have made his physician father proud to know that his only son was the best-educated DJ in the country.

A couple of years later, a nervous Engvall spotted the fair Gail in the audience with some of her friends at his Dallas debut as a stand-up comedian. Later mutual acquaintance reintroduced them at the bar. They exchanged phone numbers on a two-drink minimum card, then became friends and finally husband and wife.

Without his wife, it's highly doubtful that "The Bill Engvall Show" would today be written on a stage door at the CBS Radford Studios (once the home of such shows as "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and "Roseanne") in Studio City and a 4 1/2-story billboard advertising "The Bill Engvall Show" would have appeared in New York's Times Square.

Nor would 3.9 million TBS viewers (a huge number by ad-supported cable TV standards) have tuned in for a family-oriented sitcom. Nor would Engvall have been a part of "The Blue Collar Comedy Tour," the juggernaut that vaulted him to fame along with Larry the Cable Guy, Jeff Foxworthy and Ron White through a concert tour, a feature film and a television series.

The "Blue Collar" phenomenon was the springboard to "The Bill Engvall Show," a gentle half-hour comedy he helped create, develop and executive produce.

"When TBS approached me to do a show, my response was only making something that the whole family could watch," he explained. "As a kid, I would watch 'My Three Sons' and 'The Dick Van Dyke Show' with my parents and three sisters."

Engvall now portrays Bill Pearson, a family counselor working with dysfunctional families in a Denver suburb while raising three young children with his no-nonsense, plain-spoken wife, Susan (Nancy Travis). A traditional parent and husband, he would welcome perfect family harmony, but he doesn't expect it.

"I am Bill Pearson," said Engvall. "He happens to be a family therapist and guy who always tries to do the right thing. Most of the time he does; occasionally he screws up. But he loves his family."

While Travis plays Susan, he says she's really just Gail in disguise.

"She is the first to support and compliment me, but she's also at the end of the line saying, 'Awww, you could have done better.'"

As one of "The Bill Engvall Show's" writers, he frequently taps his own family dynamics for story inspiration.

"In real life I have two children - Travis, 16, and Emily, 21 - who are older than the three actors playing my

kids in the show," he said. "But it only means I've been there and done that; I learned things along the way."

The Texas native was born in Galveston but spent his preteen years in Winslow, Ariz.

"I always wanted to be an actor, and I remember sitting in Winslow's Tonto Drive-In watching 'Rio Bravo'" he recalled. "But it was my wife who actually encouraged me to seriously pursue it."

She also encouraged him to try stand-up comedy, probably not the norm for a woman who was six months pregnant with their first child when they moved to Los Angeles 22 years ago. Broke, they lived in a rented house they couldn't afford. To make ends meet during his five years of pursuing his dream through acting classes and odd jobs, Gail pitched in by working as a physical therapist whenever possible.

"She had ways to make me take acting classes and comedy gigs - never saying a negative thing about me while I was on the road 50 weeks out of 52 doing stand-up, and she raised two great kids at home," he said.

Their luck took a turn for the better with a 1991 guest shot on "Designing Women" and a year on "Delta" (1992).

A year on "The Jeff Foxworthy Show" (1996-97) sealed his fate, backed by the 1996 release of his debut comedy album ("Here's Your Sign"). He recently co-starred in the comedy film "Air Farce," taped the third season of his comedy/reality show called "Country Fried Home Videos," finished up his ninth album ("15 Degrees Off Cool") and released a book ("Just a Guy: Notes From a Blue Collar Life").

"I'm waiting to wake up one day saying, 'Oh, my God, I had the greatest dream,'" he said.

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