

Who you calling a “midget”?

Little people take a stand against the offensive word -- and a world that thinks it's OK to mock them

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Matt and Amy Roloff with their children Molly and Jeremy (back row), Zack and Jacob (front row), and Peter Dinklage in "The Station Agent"

Jimmy and Darlene Korpai of Crawford, N.Y., will always remember the night they fired Donald Trump's "Celebrity Apprentice."

It was this past April, and the contestants' task was to create a viral video promoting All detergent.

"I got a bad feeling as soon as I heard them say 'small and mighty,'" says Jimmy, referring to All's line of highly concentrated soaps.

His instincts were dead on. "What about if we use little people and let them wash themselves in All detergent in the bathtub ... and you hang them out to dry?" suggested superstar running back Herschel Walker. Joan Rivers: "We can hang them out on my terrace."

The resulting video, starring motorcycle maven Jesse James and titled "Jesse James Gets Dirty With Midgets." features three very short actors clad in All-bottle blue, whose yelling and hose-squirting and zippy fast-motion action (including an unexplained mallet to James' gut) leave his T-shirt sparkling clean.

"Imagine if I said what Herschel Walker did about a black person," says Jimmy, 37, a sculptor and designer. But it wasn't that, or the video, or the peppering of the episode with the word "midget," which — as even some on the show noted — is considered derogatory by people with dwarfism, that left the Korpais truly aghast. More than anything, it was this assurance, made to the group by James: "[Little people] know that people point and laugh at them and they are comfortable within themselves and they have fun right back."

"Here is a celebrity," Jimmy says, "telling people that it's all right to point and laugh at our daughter."

The Korpais are the parents of Hailey, 3, who has achondroplasia, the most common form of dwarfism. (The standard definition of dwarfism includes anyone 4-foot-10 or smaller whose stature is attributed to one of at least 200 medical conditions that cause dwarfism.)

Like approximately 80 percent of parents of children with dwarfism, Jimmy and Darlene are of average stature. Their efforts to educate — and reassure — themselves about Hailey's condition brought them to their local chapter of Little People of America, a 5,000-member organization offering medical information, social support and, increasingly, community outreach and political advocacy for dwarfs and their families. (Past and present agenda items: outlaw "dwarf tossing," lower the height of ATMs, raise awareness about advances in genetics — or, depending on one's view, eugenics.) The Korpais

soon found themselves determined to help alter the culture into which Hailey had been born, which, for all its advances in civility — when was the last time you heard somebody called “a cripple”? — still finds “midgets” fair game for ridicule. The two have spearheaded an effort on the part of LPA to file a formal complaint about “Celebrity Apprentice” with the FCC. Says Darlene, 36, who raises Hailey full-time: “In this p.c. world, I don’t see why we’re the last group it’s OK to make fun of.”

Which brings us to right now — and to what dwarfism expert and LPA stalwart Dr. Betty M. Adelson calls a “historic moment” for people with profound short stature. (Note: Adelson is my mother-in-law; my sister-in-law, Anna, 34, has achondroplasia.)

Dwarfs have weathered “Under the Rainbow” and the Oompa Loompas and approximately 158 sightings of “the plane, the plane” — not to mention Howard Stern’s “Eric the Midget” and Pedro Martinez’s “lucky” one: roles and gags in which the whole point, and source of matter-of-taste hilarity, is that the guy is, you know, *really short*. That’s not going away soon.

But there’s been progress. In “The Station Agent,” actor Peter Dinklage played a fully realized leading character who was, you know, also short. LPA considered Fox’s “The Littlest Groom” “equal-opportunity embarrassment” for all involved; plus, hey, lots of people loved Charla on “The Amazing Race.”

Today, the best-known, most-visible dwarfs on TV are not blue-suited scrubbing bubbles but members of the Roloff family, whose real lives are chronicled — sensitively and in-depth, by most accounts — on one of TLC’s most popular shows, “Little People, Big World.” (There’s also “The Little Couple,” and the frequently aired one-off “Little Parents, Big Pregnancy,” both of which are doing well.)

That’s “historic” on its own. But the dwarfism community itself, insofar as it’s represented by LPA, has also been transformed. Back in the day, Adelson says, “dwarfs kept very busy trying to show they were like everyone else.” Not so with the “new generation”: media- and Internet-savvy dwarfs and their parents, like the Korpais, who grew up watching other disability and rights groups form their identities and stake their claims. So now, more than ever before, LPA is coming out swinging.

The group has recently taken two proactive and unprecedented steps: disinviting the Radio City Christmas Spectacular’s “elf” recruiters from LPA’s annual national conference, held last week in Brooklyn, N.Y. — and announcing at the conference, officially, and once and for all, that the word “midget” is anathema.

“When referring to people of short stature, Little People of America will use the terms ‘dwarf,’ ‘little person,’ ‘person with dwarfism,’ or ‘person of short stature,’” reads the group’s statement. “In addition to promoting positive language around people of short stature, Little People of America will ... spread awareness to prevent use of the word ‘midget,’ considered offensive by Little People of America.”

I attended the conference as a reporter. Over and over, the participants I interviewed — including one black mother of a toddler with achondroplasia — made the same analogy: The “M-word” should be considered as unacceptable as the “N-word.”

Perhaps now you’re reminded of the “R-word”: that is, last summer’s clamorous — and controversial — protest of the use of the word “retard” in the movie “Tropic Thunder.” Then and now with the LPA, it has been incorrectly reported that advocates have demanded an all-out “ban” on the word in question. (That wouldn’t fly with the FCC, anyway, whose policing of content is actually pretty limited, and which doesn’t expressly ban words at all — not even the so-called seven dirty ones.) The stated goal of both campaigns: open eyes, boost sensitivity, get folks to think twice.

But — snarkosphere notwithstanding — there’s reason to believe that the M-word campaign might be welcomed a bit more graciously outside the disability community than was its predecessor. While many

of us embrace and defend “retard” and “retarded” as pungent synonyms for “dumbass,” many also use the word “midget” as simple description. “Many people don’t realize the word ‘midget’ is offensive in the first place,” says Gary Arnold, 38, vice-president of public relations for LPA (and public relations coordinator for a disability rights and service group in Chicago).

People, that is, like the Gray Lady herself. A March article buried in the Times’ business section mentioned, in passing, a famous photo showing “J. P. Morgan Jr. with a midget who had been plopped in his lap by an opportunistic publicist.” Outcry from dwarfs and their families — including detailed historical background provided by Adelson, author of two authoritative books about dwarfism — had this notable result: a rare addition to the New York Times’ style manual. (Changes are made only five or six times a year, according to a spokesperson.) As public editor Clark Hoyt wrote in April, the new entry states that people of unusually (and medically) short stature should be referred to as dwarfs, not “midgets.”

Still, LPA’s ousting of Radio City and its anti-“midget” campaign are — like the history and usage of the word itself — not without complication or controversy.

Etymologically, at least, it’s easy to explain the word’s offense: It’s derived from “midge,” a type of tiny fly that may bite or spread disease. But part of the word “midget’s” P.R. problem is that the term (like “retarded”) was once used comfortably, particularly to distinguish people who were small but proportionate (usually as the result of a growth hormone deficiency) from those who were small but disproportionate (usually due to one of various bone disorders, such as achondroplasia). It was also once the term of choice for dwarfs in the entertainment world. In fact, LPA itself was founded in 1957 by actor Billy Barty and about 20 colleagues as “Midgets of America.” The name was changed three years later. Even, or especially, as more diverse (and “respectable”) professions have opened up to people with dwarfism, its vestigial freak-show connotation has remained, and has come to rankle.

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