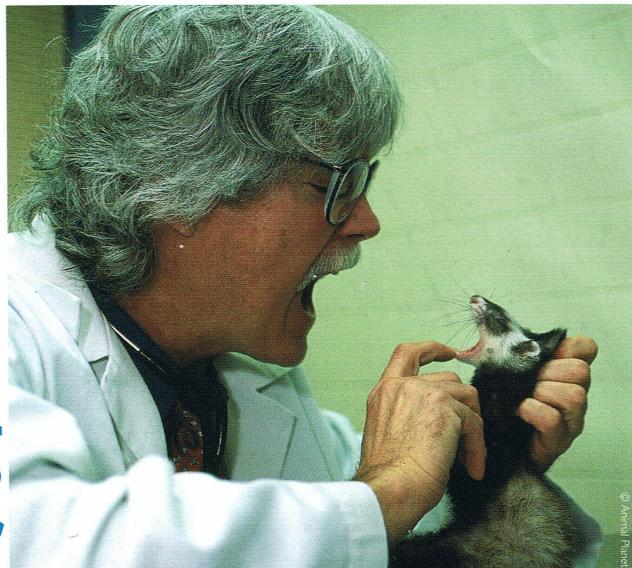


On the lighter side

Paging Doctor Big Laughs

By Roxanne Hawn

Veterinarian
seeks stress
relief through
stand-up



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I hustle down a Denver street alongside Dr. Kevin Fitzgerald, of Animal Planet's *Emergency Vets* fame. It's late. It's cold. He's carrying a crockpot.

We've just left the Comedy Works, where Fitzgerald did nearly an hour of stand-up. Abuzz over having his first DVD filmed, he's spent an hour seeking assurances the performance went well. Wearing holey green tights he revealed for his tap-dancing finale, Fitzgerald asks repeatedly, "It was OK? It was good?"

We head to his cousin's Irish pub two blocks away. Inside, Fitzgerald navigates his way past well-wishers and heads straight for the back

room. A woman rushes up to me, visibly concerned, and asks, "Does he have a turtle in that box?" Without missing a beat, I say, "No, it's a crockpot." As Fitzgerald sometimes quips on stage, "It's not a joke yet, but it's a good story."

FROM WHENCE HE CAME

Fitzgerald grew up in Denver. His first pet was a turtle named Sam. In his act, he has six brothers, but in life only one. For comedic purposes, his late mother lives on—smoking cigars, suggesting jokes, giving him the chance to play straight man in a one-man show.

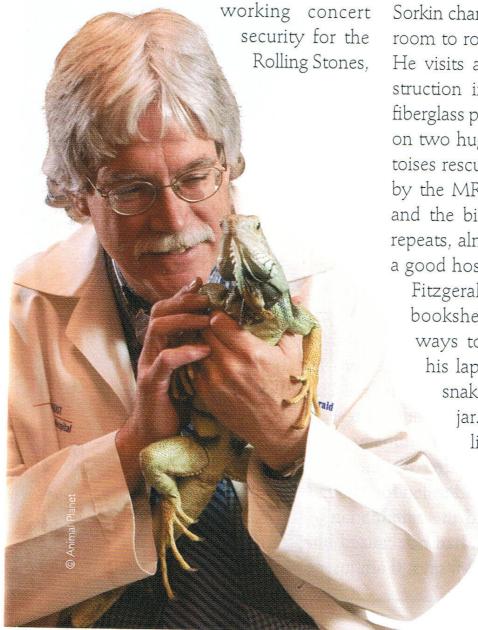
Fitzgerald is single and 55 but

jokes, "I read at a 57-year-old level." Well over 6 feet tall, with a quiet intensity, Fitzgerald looks like the love child of Tom Selleck and Albert Einstein. He's both a laid-back product of the 1960s and a baby boomer workaholic who sleeps just 3 hours a night. "I'm afraid I'll miss something," he says.

Growing up, Fitzgerald was part nerd, part typical boy, with a funny side lurking on the sidelines. "I was like the apprentice class clown. I was like his backup, if he was sick," he says.

He recently fostered a Chinese crested dog, whose owner was in an assisted-living center during treatment for breast cancer. Otherwise, he's without pets. A veterinary school reject, Fitzgerald earned his master's degree and PhD in endocrinology. When he applied again later, he was the oldest student in his class at Colorado State University, but he shrugs, "Life isn't a footrace."

Between 1969 and 1983, Fitzgerald earned money for college by working concert security for the Rolling Stones,



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Since You Asked ...

Which are funnier: dogs or cats?

Dogs are funny because they're natural clowns. Cats don't tend to let themselves be funny. They don't fall as much as dogs or crash into things. They don't get into the jams that dogs do. They take themselves very seriously, too. They're very fastidious about their grooming: *What's that on me? What's that on me?* Dogs are like *Hey, look at this! I've got mustard all over my head.*

Who's funnier: you or Snoopy?

He's got a stronger jaw line, and he's drawn better than I am. I'm poorly drawn.

If I weren't a veterinarian or a comedian, I'd be a _____.

If I had my choice of what I could be, I think I'd be a sea turtle. They have such a great life: gliding like that, being in the warm water, in the sun. That'd be a good thing. Or I'd be a good book that everyone reads.

Willie Nelson, The Who, Bob Marley, Elvis, and many others. "It was fun to be a little boy from Denver and get to see the world," he says.

THE DOCTOR

At work, he moves like an Aaron Sorkin character: quickly walking from room to room, talking the entire time. He visits a Welsh corgi with an obstruction in the ICU. He touches a fiberglass patch on a turtle, then checks on two huge, endangered African tortoises rescued in a drug raid. Breezing by the MRI system, the CT scanner, and the biomechanics laboratory, he repeats, almost like a mantra, "This is a good hospital."

Fitzgerald's cubicle is packed with bookshelves, so he shuffles sideways to reach his chair. Next to his laptop sits a preserved rattlesnake, floating in an old sun-tea jar. Beside that, the message light on his phone blinks endlessly. Each day, he gets some 70 phone messages. The hospital consumes 12 hours a day, 5 days a week.

It's nearly 7 PM, and Fitzgerald still needs to prepare a presentation for a veterinary conference in Chicago before he hits the stage. His job? Make them laugh every 15 seconds.

THE COMIC

For 200 nights a year on stage, Fitzgerald uses the rush of anxiety and affirmation to relieve stress. "I work a lot doing comedy," he says, "but this is to blow off steam . . . It's kind of like ski jumping or getting shot out of a cannon."

Fitzgerald first performed at the Comedy Works in August 1986. Today, he's not only a local headliner, but he travels the country opening for others and doing private gigs.

On stage, Fitzgerald uses veterinary material, like the client who asked for an anecdote for her pet or the one who wondered if guinea pigs had individual fingerprints. "Why?" Fitzgerald asks, "You missing some wood chips?"

He jokes about gourmet cat food and breath mints for dogs, but he also talks about the rise of inappropriate pets—like the ocelot (a wild cat)

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living in a high-rise or the "mutant rabbit" (really a wallaby).

He tells a story about getting arrested for operating on that ocelot, rather than squeal on the owner. "I think I have confidentiality, like a priest," he says on stage. "I can't rat on my sheep. You know?" At the end of the story, in which a judge sentences him to community service, Fitzgerald adds, "The number of illegal animals out there is incredible. We need to do something about it. No joke."

But if you think it's all just pets are ha-ha funny, you'll be disappointed. Fitzgerald's humor is also bawdy at times, but he admits clean is better. "If you can write a clean joke and a dirty joke, the clean joke is funnier," he explains.

It took Fitzgerald about a week to convince his boss to agree to do Emergency Vets.

The nearly hour-long set ends with a story about learning to tap dance at 50. Fitzgerald explains he was the oldest one in the class, adding "The second oldest was 8." To catcalls and screams, he drops his jeans on stage and reveals green tights that have seen better days. He slips on his tap shoes and cues the music: "Here Comes Santa Claus" and "Jingle Bells." With the audience clapping along, the routine indeed looks like something from a child's recital. It's a triumph of physical comedy.

A little winded, Fitzgerald ends with a story about having gallbladder surgery and being scared. The nurse tells him, "Every morning, I say, 'No one is going to be scared on my shift!'"

"Isn't that nice?" Fitzgerald asks. "That's what we have to do. Be nice to each other." And he walks off-stage. Boisterous applause follows.

In the green room, Fitzgerald empties a crockpot filled with soggy pasta—a prop that got cut at the last minute. Then, as night merges with early morning, he relaxes at his cousin's pub, where it turns out, he's been known to patch up a turtle or two in the back room.

HP

Roxanne Hawn is a professional writer based in Golden, Colorado. She and her border collie, Lilly, enjoy agility training together.