



THE WOMEN'S MEDIA CENTER

Making Women Visible and Powerful in the Media

HOME | ABOUT THE WMC | LIBRARY | GET INVOLVED | RESOURCES | PRESS ROOM | BLOG | DONATE | CONTACT US

SIGN-UP FOR WMC NEWS

WMC Search

SEARCH

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emily Wilson is a radio and print reporter based in San Francisco. She has done stories for dozens of media outlets including NPR, KQED-FM, Agence France-Presse, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Edutopia* and *Alternet*. She also teaches English and math to adults working on getting a GED or high school diploma at City College of San Francisco.



Media Attacks: Getting Even—and Then Some

By Emily Wilson

Stung by Michael Savage's attack on children with autism and their parents, playwright Carolyn Doyle, in a one-woman performance currently running in San Francisco, uses her craft to show how a family navigates a mysterious world.

April 13, 2009

Carolyn Doyle doesn't listen to



conservative host Michael Savage's radio show, "The Savage Nation." So she didn't hear him label children with autism brats whose fathers need to tell them: "Don't act like a moron." But she got an email from the organization, [Media Matters for America](#), as well as from many of her friends. Doyle, whose son Joaquin has severe autism—he can't feed himself or talk—was so infuriated that she spent hours emailing, faxing and calling station managers, asking them to take Savage off the air, as well as emailing and faxing Savage himself.

Doyle said the most upsetting conversation she had was with a station manager in San Francisco, where Savage's show originates.

"He seemed like a really decent person," she says. "He talked to me for about twenty minutes and he kept defending him, saying Savage is concerned about over medicating and wants to open up a dialogue, which is just not true at all. It was this awful doublespeak, and I just started crying. I hadn't cried about autism for a really long time."

Doyle decided to put that anger at Savage and his remarks into a show she was developing at the Marsh Theater in San Francisco, [Confessions of a Refrigerator Mother](#), about daily life in her family with Joaquin, her daughter Amelia and her husband Leo. The show plays through April, which is Autism



Email



Print



Sign-Up



Share



Donate

Awareness Month.

“Michael Savage made me feel marginalized,” she says. “And I didn’t want to feel marginalized.”

Originally Doyle thought of titling it *A Gal’s Guide to Grief*, but decided that was too vague, and she wanted to let people know they were going to see a show about autism, but also get across that the show, while it doesn’t gloss over how hard it is to deal with Joaquin’s disability, is often funny and lighthearted. Doyle talks about Joaquin’s obsession with *Clifford the Big Red Dog* and her morbid fear of losing her teeth. She lists some of the affectionate nicknames the family has for Joaquin, including Kiki, Lovebug, Mi Amor, and Corazon.

“Refrigerator mother” was a term coined in the 40s to describe mothers of children with autism and schizophrenia. The theory, originated by Austrian psychiatrist Leo Kanner, was that these women were emotionally frigid and had just “defrosted” enough to produce a child. Doyle says using that term in her show’s title allowed her to get over some of the sadness she felt when she first read about the theory that blamed the mother, the way she thinks Savage’s comments puts the blame on the father.

“I want to take back the term,” Doyle said. “The way the queer community took back queer.”

Along with Savage’s characterization of children with autism, Doyle says recently the prominence in the media of Jenny McCarthy and her story of how her son recovered from his autism, can distort people’s idea of the disease. McCarthy has written a book, *Louder Than Words: A Mother’s Journey in Healing Autism*, and the story of the model/comedian and her son has been featured in *People Magazine*, CNN and ABC, among others.

“I’m happy for Jenny McCarthy, I really am,” Doyle says. “But her child was on the high functioning end of the spectrum. My son is really, really low. So it’s great for her and for him, but it goes back to this idea you can fix your child. And that’s a really sexy idea, but that’s just not possible for everyone. With Down’s Syndrome, no one suggests they should get over it.”

Doyle says McCarthy, who lives with Jim Carrey, makes a great media story. Who doesn’t like a story about a child getting better? But she says people also hunger for stories that acknowledge the sadness in their lives. She saw this in the response she got from a previous show on faith where she talked about her children and motherhood.

“It’s like they wanted to touch me,” she says about the audience. “Grief is so taboo in our culture and everybody has grief. People would come up to me and say, ‘My dad has Alzheimer’s and I’m just really sad,’ or ‘My mom is dying of HIV,’ or whatever. We think everything is supposed to be duckies and bunnies, and it’s not. Motherhood is hard. Marriage is hard.”

Doyle does want to make people more aware of autism, but she says she worked to make her show at the Marsh not self-indulgent or a form of therapy for herself; she wants it to be a theatrical piece anyone could enjoy. Even Michael Savage.

“I invited him and I left a note at the box office with a \$20 bill inside saying ‘Thanks for coming!’” she says. “I would really like him to see the show, but he probably won’t.”

- [HOME](#)
- [ABOUT WMC](#)
- [LIBRARY](#)
- [GET INVOLVED](#)
- [RESOURCES](#)
- [PRESS ROOM](#)
- [FORUM](#)
- [DONATE](#)
- [CONTACT US](#)