

The REALL News\*

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." -- James Randi

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Don't Push Me, Lady!

by David Bloomberg, REALL Chairman

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The very next day, I was called by a producer for Downey, and asked if I would be interested in appearing with Detective Bruce Walstad and some "psychics" later that week. I agreed and called Bruce to plan our strategy.

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I brought a little ammunition to the taping: the now-infamous invitation to Ellen Schanzle-Haskins' campaign fundraiser featuring Greta Alexander, a couple newsletters, and the book *Psychic Sleuths*. I didn't expect that Greta or any of the people mentioned in the book, edited by Joe Nickell, would be on the show, but wanted something to wave around as back-up to whatever debate we might have.

My wife and I arrived early for the show, and were seated in a "green room" backstage -- away from that of the "psychics." Bruce came a little while later, and that's when the fun started.

Some of the staff had not been informed of who we were, or even what the show's topic was. When one of them asked us and we told us the show was about psychics, she followed by asking if we were the psychics. Bruce answered that he was and proceeded to give her a dead-on reading which had her astounded. To top it off, he took her watch and "psychically" made it stop. She left fully believing that Bruce was a psychic. A second woman came in and he again had her in full belief of his abilities, before explaining to both of them that he, in fact, had no powers whatsoever.

When the taping began, we were ushered into the other green room, which had a monitor to watch the show. The psychics were on first, and they would bring us on approximately 20 minutes into the show. As they introduced the psychics, the first two were nobody we'd ever heard of: Marian Belushi-Miles, John Belushi's sister; and William Monroe, who supposedly gained his powers at the age of five while walking on hot coals. The third, however, took us by surprise. Dorothy Allison, well-known across the country, was introduced as a psychic detective who helped police find "more than 200 bodies."

Neither of us expected any well-known psychics on the show, so we were a bit surprised. However, I knew there was an entire chapter about Allison in the *Psychic Sleuths* book I happened to bring. I grabbed the book and ran into the hall to find out what I could about her in the short time I had (I had to run into the hall because her husband was still in the green room with us, since it was the only one with a monitor).

In checking the book, I found several references to the Atlanta Child Murders Case, in which Allison failed miserably. According to the reports, she gave 42 names of the possible killer, none of which were "Wayne" or "Williams" (Wayne Williams was convicted of the murders). This was exactly what would work well on a TV talk show like Downey.

Ammunition in hand, we watched the "psychics" show off their powers. Monroe did a stunningly poor reading on a woman from the audience, to the point that Downey came over and did a better one. Belushi-Miles did a slightly better job, but never went past the obvious cold-reading techniques. In fact, Bruce and I were down in the immediate backstage area by that time, and Bruce entertained the show's staff by doing essentially the same cold reading while Belushi-Miles did hers.

Monroe also told a story that I am absolutely certain I've heard before -- and not from him. He claimed that a woman came to him for a reading at a psychic fair, and he told her that her father, Robert, thanked her for the crucifix. She had no idea what he was talking about, but later called him back to say that her brother had, indeed, placed a crucifix in her father's casket. Amazing! I've asked around a bit and several others also remember hearing this story from another source, but we cannot yet pinpoint it. It may be simply one of those stories which has been around long enough to have entered the realm of "urban legend." Either way, I find it somewhat odd that Monroe has adopted it as if it were his own.

Belushi-Miles also did a reading of Downey, but it was even worse than the one she did for the audience member. Downey had already related a story indicating he had been close to his now-deceased father. So, the first thing Belushi-Miles did was say that Downey had been close to his father. The amusing part was when she said that she only saw the word, "father," because she didn't know his name. Whoa! What a psychic! I have a not-so-psychic hint for her: Morton Downey, \*Junior\*.

After the next commercial break, we were brought to the stage, but not introduced. Downey challenged the psychics to tell him who we were. None took up the challenge, though Allison produced a piece of paper which I guess was supposed to have something to do with us. Downey read it and found that she had written: Richardson, Elks Hunting Lodge, Ohio, and College. Allison said that these are "impressions" she got, similar to those she gets when trying to solve murders. She said they might have something to do with the murderer, where they might be found, a person she's talking to, or other related things. Well, that certainly sounds specific enough to solve a murder case. Unfortunately, none of these things had anything to do with Bruce or me.

After reading Allison's unrelated notes, Downey introduced us. When we discussed my position on psychics, and I said that psychics are either fooling others or fooling themselves, the "psychics" got a bit riled up and retorted with the wonderfully well-thought-out comments of "That's garbage" from Monroe and "That's crap" from Belushi-Miles. The audience, however, seemed to be split between those who believed, those who were skeptical, and those who just wanted to see a good fight.

Bruce explained that there are two types of psychics: the con-artists and the less harmful ones who simply do a few readings. Allison jumped him immediately, not even letting him finish his statement. Once Downey calmed her down, he added that there is no hard data showing that psychics have ever helped solve a crime. Allison retorted by showing a badge of honor bestowed upon her by some police force for supposedly finding two bodies (apparently, Allison doesn't

understand that a badge is not evidence).

I was still rather nervous, and had told Bruce that he would probably have to do most of the talking, because I wouldn't know when to jump in. That turned out to not be a problem. When Allison pulled out her badge, I pulled out the *Psychic Sleuths* book and the battle was on! I asked if she had solved the Atlanta Child Murders Case, and she was somewhat taken aback. I pressed by quoting the book about the 42 names she gave out. This apparently got her rather upset, as she stood up out of her chair, moved in front of Walstad (who was seated such that he separated her and I) and started yelling in my face. Well, those of you who know me know that I'm not going to just sit there while a grumpy little old lady is screaming in my face, so I stood up also and yelled back at her. She responded by pushing me in the shoulder (unfortunately, Downey stood up in front of us to try to separate us, and you can't see her push me; you can, however, hear me yell, "Don't push me, lady!"). Bruce later told me that two security guards jumped up and started running towards us, apparently thinking I would strike back at Allison, but Downey sat us both down and some measure of decorum was restored. Well, I had followed, without really thinking about it, Bob Smet's advice and it seemed to work pretty well -- at least it certainly got a rise out of Allison.

Downey asked why I believed in this book, and I explained the difference between a "belief" and an "investigation," of which the book was the latter. Monroe chimed in an inane comment about religion, which he was apparently trying to relate to belief, though it had nothing to do with the rest of the discussion.

At the commercial break, which gave us a few minutes to relax, Bruce leaned over and whispered to me humorously that I needed to get more involved. Meanwhile, Belushi-Miles, who was mostly silent while the cameras rolled, took the opportunity to harangue us then. She did this during the next several breaks as well, but barely said another word on-camera, where the debate was supposed to take place.

During the following segments, Bruce was able to get in a discussion of a California study showing that psychics were of absolutely no help to police. Also, several people from the audience spoke up, including some other "psychics." One stated that Downey would be bigger than Rush Limbaugh within a few months (either indicating that he would have to eat a great deal or that his show would be picked up and distributed to other stations like wildfire -- in either case, it's a prediction which is falsifiable, though I doubt she'll lose any sleep -- or customers -- if it turns out to be untrue).

An audience member asked Allison how psychic she could be if she let me rile her up the way I did. Allison claimed that she knew what would happen, and pointed to the paper Downey had read earlier. I jumped in and asked what "Richardson" or "Ohio" had to do with me, and Allison claimed that it could refer to anybody (what a great prediction). So I took the question to the audience and asked if any of them were named Richardson -- to my relief, none were. Allison merely adopted a smug look and blew off the whole situation.

When another "psychic" from the audience stood up and claimed that her mother's family name was Richardson, and that the family was from Ohio, members of the audience, sharing my opinion, started yelling that she was a "plant." I find it interesting that she only referred to the two points I had made in my statements, not the full list given by Allison. In other words, she did not explain "college" or "Elks hunting lodge." I have a feeling that, had I used those two in my argument, we would have heard that her mother went to college near an Elks hunting lodge, too. I should note that this same woman regaled us with a tale about how she never wanted to have this power, and then, mere moments later, told us how she had to go through all sorts of things in order to learn how to get this power she supposedly never wanted.

The surprise of the show was that Allison had been called in to solve a murder case. A dog had been out wandering one day and brought back a woman's leg to its owner. A few days later, it brought back the other leg. The police tried to find the rest of the body and had failed. Allison was supposed to help break the case.

Staff from the show took Allison around and videotaped her in action. We heard that the murderer has knee problems, and that he travels down a certain highway. Well, that will certainly solve the crime! She also pointed out a cemetery near the road and proclaimed psychic success, because she had predicted that there would be such a cemetery, with somebody named "White" buried there. I have a task for her: find me a cemetery without somebody named "White" in it.

Allison also predicted that there would be advancement of the case around February 15-18. Could she have been a bit vaguer? Even if the case isn't solved in that time period (which it wasn't), she can point to just about anything and claim it covers her prediction. This is similar to the way in which she claimed to help catch John Wayne Gacy -- by telling the police when and supposedly where a body would be found. I have news for Allison and her believers: Even if all of those predictions turned out true, she still hadn't helped the police find anything; she merely told them when they would find it!

However, we don't even have to worry about that, because her prediction did not turn out to be true (although, like I said, who knows what she'll claim). The police used DNA matching to determine who the legs belonged to, but this occurred at the beginning of this month, not even close to the time period she gave. And they certainly haven't solved the case yet, a month after she said there would be a major break! Perhaps Downey will invite her back to explain her failures. Now that is a show I'd like to see!

The show ended on a question posed by an audience member. She wanted to know why we were against psychics if they just helped people. I told a story told to me and a hundred or so other people by former WYMG morning show DJ Don Murphy. Murphy's mother began acting strangely for the last few years of her life. After she died, his sister explained why. His mother began seeing a psychic who told her, among other things, that she would die crossing a bridge. Well, to avoid that, she refused to cross any bridges. Unfortunately, her doctor lived on the other side of a bridge, and she died of an illness that could have been cured if she had only seen him. Downey countered that she had actually died of "stupidity" and cut to the final commercial. I'm not sure if the audience, or even Downey, understood, but he had essentially made my point for me -- listening to a psychic is stupid.

After the show, Bruce and I tried to be polite to the people we'd been debating, but received less than warm responses. I told Allison that it had been nice meeting her, and she retorted, "It wasn't nice meeting you!" I figured that meant she wouldn't be autographing my copy of *Psychic Sleuths*.

Bruce was approached by Belushi-Miles' husband, who claimed that he had proof of a psychic helping the police. He said his wife had been used by a suburban police department to solve a murder. Unfortunately, she signed a secrecy agreement in which she promised not to reveal it to anybody. Some proof. My first question is obvious: Why did she sign the form?! Bruce did some investigating with other police officers after the show and found out which case she was talking about. However, he also found out it is still unsolved, so he doesn't know what part she supposedly played or what she supposedly did. She has called Bruce several times since the show, and he asked her in one of these conversations why she didn't use her powers to find missing children and the like. She said that it is just too taxing on her. Poor thing.

The final irony of the night was the trip home. The Downey show sent both me and my wife and Allison and her husband to the hotel in the same limo! I was as polite as I could be, even getting Allison a beer from the cooler, but her attitude didn't waiver. She sat there the entire ride, muttering to her husband about this case and that case, and how she helped and so on. I don't know what she thought she was accomplishing, but my wife and I simply ignored her.

My first time on a TV talk show was over, and I was relieved. It went much better than I had thought it would, and I am very thankful to Bruce for helping me through it. At our March REALL meeting, I showed the tape of the show and asked everybody if they thought that Bob Smet's suggestion was a good one. The general reaction was that for this particular show, due to Downey's personal style, it was a good way to force the issue. I think that Bruce and I worked well as a team, and that the style I used would not have worked nearly as well if he had not been there as a calm voice of reason (as opposed to my loud voice of reason). I guess we'll just have to see what happens next time.