

[New Yorker handles her business and MS with humor](#)



Julie Gaines approaches everything in life with a sense of humor, including her MS.

by Mike Knight

Pretty much everything Julie Gaines says, touches or does is funny. Her humor is her superpower. She can't not be quirky, or self-deprecating, or just charmingly, infectiously, funny.

Owner of Fishs Eddy, a New York City institution famous for selling all manner of restaurant-quality dishware, kitchen accessories and home accent pieces, Gaines at one point thought about becoming a stand-up comedian and quit doing the dishes for good.

"I did it obsessively for two years just because we were going through a hard time at the store," she says, "and it was an outlet for me." Calling it a midlife crisis, Gaines decided the stage life wasn't for her. "I realized I really like writing better than performing."



Gaines adds humor to all of her pursuits, whether that's on the stage, writing books or painting.

A 2014 post from her now defunct blog, Table of Content, bears her decision out. "Unfortunately, I was born without the cooking gene. In fact, I'm the queen of takeout," Gaines wrote. "A million years ago, when I asked Ben [her son] to give me his list of friends for his eighth birthday party, Monty the delivery guy from Picasso Pizza was No. 1. Let's put it this way: When the doorbell rings at my house, everyone runs to answer it because chances are, it's dinner."

Her humor is also in her paintings and the whimsical busts she creates, and in her book, *Minding the Store: A Big Story about a Small Business*. It's in the store's window displays and it's in the videos she produces for Fishs Eddy's Instagram account and its 81,000+ followers. Framed by her black glasses, the look of feigned horror in Gaines' eyes in *Bingo in Boca*, a video about playing bingo with her mother and her friends, is priceless. As is *Bake News*, a "tragedy" featuring Gaines trying — and, in light of her aforementioned blog post, perhaps predictably failing — to bake a chickpea casserole.

And her humor is in videos and photos she creates and posts about her life with multiple sclerosis. Gaines was diagnosed with MS in 2011. "Suggestion to the Management at the Judith Jaffe Multiple Sclerosis Center," reads the text superimposed over a photo of empty chairs in the infusion room. "Make all the chairs in the Center's infusion room massage chairs and mani/pedis available upon request."

"I really have to approach it with a sense of humor," she says. "I do laugh at it." Laughter is how Gaines copes with the disease, and her sense of humor shows up in what she shares about her life with MS via social media as means of advocacy. "I really think since awareness is important, the best way I can advocate is by using my store as a platform," she says. "Because I have a corner in a major part of New York City and a very big mouth on social media. And I'm not shy about it, and I really talk about it a lot."

A store is born

Calling hers a "normal childhood," Gaines says she was very active growing up. Always "skiing and running and doing gymnastics. I was just very coordinated and active," she says. She also developed an interest in collecting thrift shop paintings. "Just kind of wonky, quirky paintings painted by nobody in particular of nobody particular," she says. "I've always had a passion for that kind of art, folk art."

After earning her degree in art and art history at Syracuse University in 1984, Gaines decided to start her own business. "I kind of knew in the back of my head I would always have to do something entrepreneurial," she says. "And then I started my own business because I think I just have this uncanny sense of what art and things that people would like for their homes."

Still, in the beginning, "we weren't really sure what we were going to sell, which is why we chose the name Fishs Eddy (a hamlet in upstate New York)," she says. "Because we just weren't sure." Along with her ex-husband, David Lenovitz, Gaines leased "a tiny little 500-square-foot store" in 1986 in the West Village and began trying to fill it up.

"I thought, for our first store, we would sell little odd things like [the paintings she collected] and little pieces of furniture and some glassware that my ex knew about because he used to work in a store, too," she says. "And we would put together a store like that. But as soon as we found the dishware, it was clear that that would define the narrative of our store going forward."

“The dishware” was “tens and tens of thousands” of long-forgotten and unwanted vintage dishes of all sorts and types from restaurants and old airlines, railroads, hotels and more, some dating back to the early 1900s, Gaines explains.

“We found ourselves in the sub-basement of New York City’s Bowery, which was the restaurant supply district at the time,” she says. “If you owned a restaurant in the Midwest or wherever, Connecticut, you wouldn’t go to the manufacturer that makes restaurant ware, you would go to the wholesaler, which was in the Bowery.” Paired with Gaines’ paintings, the dishware began selling. And selling.

In 1989, Fishs Eddy moved from its original location to its current 4,200-square-foot location at 889 Broadway in the Flatiron District. Besides vintage dishware, the store sells dinnerware of its own designs as well as other designers, funny coffee cups, butter holders that scream “BUTTAH” on the cover and other clever, kitschy items.

Finishing her plate

The day after a long bike ride in 2011, Gaines couldn’t lift her legs to get out of bed, no matter how hard she tried. “And that was the beginning of a very long and painful journey to find out that I had MS,” she says. “Of course, it was believed that I had Lyme [disease] for a long time. And I knew I didn’t have Lyme because I’m a city girl and I don’t leave the pavement.”

“It was pretty devastating,” she continues. “The one thing I remember is how, for the few minutes of clarity I had after being hysterical, and thinking, I can’t do dishes anymore. I can’t, my whole life has changed, and I loved my life.” The business had been challenged by 9/11, by Hurricane Sandy and by COVID-19, and Gaines feared her MS would finally be its end. “Somehow, resiliency set in,” she says. “And I was like, ‘I still have it in me.’ ”

Gaines admits she’s had to make changes to how she works, and to the store’s accessibility, too. “I can walk around the store with a cane and have to sit down very often,” she says, and has a perch between two counters “where I can see everything and talk to everybody.”

“It’s so funny, because I swore I’d never use the cane to point, because I feel like that’s just a bad look. And now everyone else uses my cane to point,” Gaines says. Her employees help themselves to the scooter she uses, too, to “whip around the store.”

“I’ve given my staff the green light,” she says. “And while it was uncomfortable at the beginning, we all laugh at it. I broke down the stigma. I really did a good job breaking that stigma in the store.”

Typically “cram packed” with inventory, the store’s aisles are now wider to accommodate mobility devices, and a ramp is available to get in and out of the store upon request. “The funny thing is we keep laughing because we always have said we’re not accessible to double strollers, but now we are accessible to wheelchairs and double strollers,” Gaines says.

In addition to the accessibility improvements and breaking down the stigma with her staff, Gaines uses the store as a platform for MS advocacy. “I’m very vocal about having MS in the business,” she says. “People message me after I’ll post something about my scooter or about a bad day with MS. And I hide nothing, and they’ll say, ‘I have MS too.’ ”

Fishs Eddy has hosted fundraisers for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, as well as sponsoring fundraising teams for MS walks and stair climbs. Dana Miele, president of the Society’s Greater New York City-Long Island chapter, says Gaines’ advocacy is important in other ways, too.

“She’s bringing together the NYC community through Fishs Eddy, she’s sharing her MS story with anyone who will listen which takes extreme courage,” Miele says. “She has a sense of humor about her, where she can make light of certain situations and she can also keep things very real. Julie lights up every room she walks into. She embodies our mission to empower people affected by MS to live their best lives as she fiercely lives her best life each day despite her challenges with MS. Julie is the definition of resilience.”

Miele says Gaines has even attended her staff meetings to share her story. “My colleagues were extremely inspired by Julie’s determination to advocate for her health and inspired by her decision to turn her pain into action and create a Fishs Eddy Walk MS team.”



Gaines uses a cane while she works and has made changes to her store to accommodate other mobility devices.

Not long before the pandemic, Gaines was struggling with her MS. "I was definitely having a little meltdown one night," she says, "and I just was crying on my bed. 'I can't take it anymore.' 'This sucks.' 'Why do I have to have it?' "

And then, Gaines remembered seeing the name "Julie Stamm" on Instagram. "I see Julie's presence so much online," Gaines says, "and I literally just reached out to her because she

seems so nice and so friendly and her name's Julie." Stamm, a volunteer with the Society who also has MS and lives in Denver, called Gaines that night to talk to her. The two have become fast friends since, participating together in an MS support group via Zoom.

"[Gaines] has a way of putting humor into every part of everything, even the saddest of days," Stamm says. "You go shopping with her and she's like, 'Hey, you need any laxatives?' yelling at the top of her lungs. She's just hilarious."

Gaines has a sizable collection of rare and unusual dishes in her office, and dreams of one day opening a museum of American dinnerware. "I would like to have a museum in the store. Clearly I've gotten good at running a gift shop," she says. "My dream future is that I have the store and I also open the museum, that's my dream future. My realistic future is that I'm just here, and I'm maybe spending a little more time with physical therapy and things like that. But nothing could be more of a dream than what I have now, honestly, even with MS."

Mike Knight is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was diagnosed with MS in 2013.