

# ‘Ghostbusters’ director Paul Feig lifelong comedy lover

Mekeisha Madden Toby, Special to **The Detroit News** 9 p.m. EDT July 8, 2016

## ‘Comedy has been my thing since I was a kid,’ says the Mt. Clemens-born, Chippewa Valley High School graduate



Actress Melissa McCarthy and director Paul Feig have fun at the “Ghostbusters” red carpet event in June in Singapore. (Photo: Christopher Polk / Getty Images)

Paul Feig is a comedy geek.

His deep love for all things laughable began at a young age when Feig (pronounced Feeg) grew up in Mount Clemens. His mother, a former telephone operator named Elaine Feig, encouraged her only child to pursue his inner performer. His father, Sanford Feig, owned the Ark Surplus Store on Gratiot Avenue and supplied his son with a number of jokes the youngest Feig could tell while performing magic shows.

Fans who admire his directorial work on TV shows such as “The Office” and hit movies, including “Bridesmaids,” probably don’t know that Feig drew inspiration from his late parents and comedian Steve Martin. As a teenager, Feig signed up for all of the talent shows and plays he could while attending Chippewa Valley High School in Clinton Township. He even appeared in a few of his dad’s TV commercials.

“I was in a lot of stuff — drama club, talent shows. There is nothing I wouldn’t do back then,” said Feig, 53, during a recent phone interview promoting his latest movie, “Ghostbusters,” starring Melissa McCarthy and Kristen Wiig. The comedy, which is inspired by the 1984 original, arrives in theaters Friday.

“Comedy has been my thing since I was a kid and I’ve just always loved to laugh and loved to make people laugh,” Feig said. “Comedy is the only thing I’ve ever really cared about.”

It’s through comedy that Feig relates to his audience. As an underdog, he wasn’t the most popular guy in high school but, because he wasn’t popular, Feig found his comedic voice. It’s a talent that helped him meet his wife

of 22 years, talent manager Laurie Karon, and create his first TV series “Freaks and Geeks,” which is loosely based on his own high-school experience. The short-lived dramatic comedy aired on NBC from 1999-2000.

“Paul was kind of geeky but also very talented,” recalled Antonio Fiorvento, assistant principal at Chippewa Valley. “He was always looking to get his talent out there and show people what he could do. You have to admire that.”

After graduating from Chippewa Valley in 1980, Feig attended Wayne State University for a year and then moved to Los Angeles. He worked as a tour guide at Universal Studios Hollywood and attended the University of Southern California. After college, Feig acted in shows such as “Sabrina, the Teenage Witch” and hung out in comedy clubs, where he met filmmaker Judd Apatow of “Knocked Up” fame.

It was Apatow who helped Feig get “Freaks and Geeks” on TV, which Apatow executive produced. The show also helped launch the careers of several young actors, including James Franco, Linda Cardellini, Seth Rogen and Samm Levine.

“Paul is one of the greatest producer/directors to work with because he was an actor himself for so long,” said Levine, a Chicago native who also enjoyed roles in “Inglorious Basterds” and “Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp.” “He knows exactly how to relate to his actors, to make the collaboration between director and actor a mutually creative one, and to make his actors feel completely comfortable.”

“During the ‘Freaks and Geeks’ pilot, I was having so much fun shooting and chatting with him during the day,” Levine added. “When I’d wrap at night, I always left a thank-you note on his windshield in the parking lot. I didn’t want him to think for one minute I was taking for granted the wonderful opportunity he and Judd were giving me. And on the last day of shooting the pilot, he showed me that he’d saved them all.”

Levine also said Feig taught him the importance of the script and comedic timing.

“One of the best pointers Paul, Judd and (native Detroiter and producer) Jake Kasdan gave all the actors was ‘don’t joke the joke,’ meaning if the dialogue was already funny, which of course it was, we didn’t have to try to spice up our reads on it to try to make it funnier,” he said. “Just deliver it naturally and let the comedy stand on its own.”

Feig still believes actors shouldn’t “joke the joke,” but he said he also believes in having fun and getting the most out of a scene. For instance, while working with McCarthy, Wiig, Sandra Bullock, Rose Byrne and other actors on other movies he directed, such as “The Heat” and “Spy,” Feig allowed space and time for improvisation.



Actresses Melissa McCarthy, from left, Kate McKinnon, Leslie Jones, Kristen Wiig and “Ghostbusters” director Paul Feig speak during CinemaCon 2016: An Evening with Sony Pictures Entertainment: Celebrating the Summer of 2016 and Beyond at The Colosseum at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas in April. (Photo: Alberto E. Rodriguez / Getty Images)

Audiences can expect the same on “Ghostbusters.”

“It’s all about having a strong script,” Feig said. “Once you have that, it’s a roadmap. But when you leave room to improvise, it’s more fun and it helps you amass a lot of material to work with in the editing room.”

Unlike his other movies, “Ghostbusters” has attracted more negative attention than Feig ever anticipated. Some have grumbled quite loudly on social media because the heroes, aka paranormal exterminators, are being played by women, but the original characters were played by men. Others have bemoaned the fact that comedic actress Leslie Jones (“Saturday Night Live”), who costars as the only African-American Ghostbuster, also is the only non-scientist.

In regards to the blatant sexism the movie has attracted, Feig said he couldn’t believe people were being so closed-minded.

“I thought people would be excited for another ‘Ghostbusters’ because so many people are positive about the franchise,” he said. “Unfortunately, the Internet gives voice to a vocal micro-minority of people and that gets into the news cycle and controls it.

“I have been hit with some of the worst misogynistic stuff,” Feig said at a recent SAG-AFTRA-sponsored diversity and gender parity panel in Los Angeles. “We still get called, in the press, a ‘chick-flick’ and we are never not referred to as the ‘all-female Ghostbusters,’ which makes me crazy.”

But Feig said the comments about Jones’ character have made him more sensitive to the way people of color are portrayed in his movies.

“I feel bad that many have taken a bad look at Leslie Jones’ character,” Feig said. “We originally wrote it for Melissa, and then when we were putting it together, we figured Melissa had played a role like that before. Leslie is so funny at playing this kind of a character that we put her in there.

“But I am the first to admit, while I am a fighter for women, my record for diversity has not been as good, and I take responsibility for that.”



Director Paul Feig, who is also a screenwriter, created the TV series “Freaks and Geeks,” and directed “Bridesmaids,” “The Heat” and “Spy.” (Photo: Rich Polk / Sony)

More than anything, Feig wants moviegoers to see his take on “Ghostbusters” and laugh and have a good time. It’s a comedic desire instilled in him by his parents and his Metro Detroit upbringing.

“Having worked all over the place and met so many Midwesterners who’ve transported out to the coasts, I do see that the Midwestern sense of humor is a very specific thing other parts of the country don’t share,” Feig said.

“In Michigan and other parts of the Midwest, we want things to be very honest. We have a very good meter for detecting things that are fake and pretentious. For comedy, we like it funny but grounded.”

Mekeisha Madden Toby is a Los Angeles-based entertainment reporter and TV critic.