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# UMSt.Louis

Alumna  
Phyllis Smith  
entertains millions as  
Phyllis Lapin on the  
hit TV comedy  
'The Office'

A slice of  
Americana:  
photo book  
documents  
carnival life





*It's never just another day at the office for UM-St. Louis alumna Phyllis Smith*

By Linda Tracy

Photo by Justin Lubin, © NBC Universal

NBC's Emmy-winning comedy "The Office" features St. Louisan and UM-St. Louis graduate Phyllis Smith, who gets big laughs on the show as the placid, but peculiar Phyllis Lapin.

**L**ike more than eight million other Americans who regularly tune in, Phyllis Smith has a standing date with a television on Thursday nights when she watches "The Office." But unlike most viewers, Smith sometimes sees the sitcom with the show's cast by her side. It's just a Hollywood perk for Smith, who plays mild-mannered Dunder-Mifflin customer sales representative Phyllis (Lapin) Vance on the NBC hit comedy.

"I had a 12-inch television up until a few months ago, and just recently I got a big one, so I'm really enjoying my TV," Smith said. "One thing is that high definition is not very forgiving. Every little thing shows up. We have good make-up people who help cover up stuff."

Long before her star-studded days of pushing paper in Scranton, Pa., (where the show is set), Smith grew up in the south St. Louis neighborhood of Carondelet. She was bitten by the show-biz bug early and began dance classes at age 7.

"My dad worked hard for every dollar that we had in our family, and my parents told me if I wanted to take dancing, I'd have to make the arrangements myself," Smith said. "I can vividly remember pulling a stool over to the kitchen cabinet and getting the phone book down to call and set up my lessons. That's when my mother knew I was serious."

She first took ballet, and then ended up adding tap, jazz and modern dance to her repertoire. Smith was teaching classes by the age of 13, and she later danced with professional companies in St. Louis.

While pursuing a dance career, Smith decided to work toward a degree. She attended Forest Park Community College and then transferred to the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

"My heart was always in dancing and performing," Smith said. "But I knew my parents really wanted me to get an education, and I realized they were right. I thought I could be a good teacher since I already had experience as an instructor."

Smith graduated from UM-St. Louis in 1972 with a bachelor's degree in elementary education.

She said she had a positive experience at the university, but she decided to continue dancing professionally. That decision took her to California. Smith was part of a touring dinner theater that featured a "tasteful" vaudeville burlesque show for many years. She eventually got the opportunity to work with the Mercer Brothers, a song-dance-comic duo that performed for more than 70 years.

"Bud and Jim Mercer had this great comic act, and I used to sit backstage and listen to them," Smith said. "I was fortunate enough to listen to two pros work the audiences every night, and I think, by osmosis, it filtered into my head a bit."

Smith's dancing career ultimately was cut short by a knee injury. She then worked a series of odd jobs that paid the rent before finding work as a

casting associate. For the next 19 years, Smith assisted actors by reading lines with them while they auditioned for roles. She also helped filter out actors who weren't appropriate for roles and worked to fill the slot when new characters were written into episodes of television shows such as "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman."

Casting director Allison Jones hired Smith the day "Dr. Quinn" wrapped. Jones was casting "The Office," and Smith was on hand to tape auditions and read with actors. She read the parts of many characters, but she said she was simply doing her job as a casting associate.

"When the director was in the process of picking the leads for the show, he said he wanted me to read the part of Pam," Smith said. "I went in with John Krasinski, who got the role of Jim, and another actor who was reading for the part of Dwight. We did a scene, and when we left the room, people were laughing. I thought, 'Well, what's that about?'"

Smith was asked the next day to read the parts of Jim and Dwight, but little did she know the director was auditioning her for a role of her own. The next thing she knew, Smith received a call from the show's wardrobe department, and that's when she knew she'd been hired.

"No one ever came and asked me if I'd like to play the character of Phyllis Lapin," she said. "Of course I would have been interested, but I never went into my job as a casting associate wondering if there was a role for me. I think, again, by osmosis I had been honing a craft I didn't know I was honing."

Adapted from the cult-favorite British series of the same name, "The Office" first aired in March 2005 in the United States. The pilot episode featured four additional characters (Phyllis, Angela, Oscar and Creed) that the British series didn't include, and all four actors use their own first names on the show.

"There weren't ever any guidelines or specifics given to my character," Smith said. "It's just developed as we've gone along through the seasons, and it's still developing."

Now in its fifth season, "The Office" has changed a bit since the early days. Smith said during the first several episodes, the director had everyone sitting at their desks for as long as 12 hours at a stretch because he hadn't yet decided who would be seen in certain shots around the office.

"Back then, we didn't even have functioning computers," she said. "In season two, we were

given real computers with Internet access, and that changed our lives. We do get some actual work done while we're sitting there. I've filled out a new address book, sent out my Christmas cards, and last season, I had a huge paper spread out across my desk because I was doing my taxes."

Smith also personalizes her workspace on set. The photos on her desk picture her mom and dad and her cats. She's even managed to sneak a small St. Louis Cardinals red bird into her stuffed animal collection to the left of her desk.

"We have a great props department that creates the office environment and our desks for us," she said. "They are so thorough, and they're very concerned about things being true and accurate to Scranton. But every now and then, I'll manage to slide a few things of my own onto my desk."

For Smith, there's no downside to her job. She said cast members get along famously. She's grateful for how much fans seem to "genuinely love the show," and getting recognized has been a surprising and enjoyable experience.

"All of a sudden, like when I go to Target or anywhere, someone will come up to me," she said. "All my peeps hang out in Target and Wal-Mart. I still shop there. I don't go to Beverly Hills."

Smith recounts one fan experience that she said was particularly amusing. She was leaving a bank in California, and two teenage boys were skateboarding outside. She got to her car and turned around to see one of the boys waving frantically to her. She then looked around because she assumed he was waving at someone else.

Smith said the boy asked, "You're Phyllis, right? You're on 'The Office'?"

She nodded, and he gave her a thumbs-up as he skated away.

Smith said there are a variety of people who approach her, from teenagers to grandmothers.

"I don't understand why the 13-year-olds are so tuned into it, and hopefully the show won't prevent them from ever wanting to work in an office," she said with a laugh. "But I think people who watch the show can identify with the characters in some shape or form, and that's part of the draw to it. I just hope it continues, because it's a pleasure to work with such a great cast and crew."

"The Office" airs at 8 p.m. CDT Thursdays on NBC. Visit [http://www.nbc.com/the\\_office/](http://www.nbc.com/the_office/) for more information. 🍷