

So To Speak

WITH ROLES RANGING FROM HARRIED, WISE-CRACKING MOM LOIS ON “MALCOLM IN THE MIDDLE” TO THE VOICE OF JUDGE CONSTANCE HARM ON “THE SIMPSONS” TO HER CURRENT SPOT AS JUDGE TRUDY KESSLER ON “RAISING THE BAR,” SEVEN-TIME EMMY- AND THREE-TIME GOLDEN GLOBE-NOMINATED ACTRESS JANE KACZMAREK HAS EARNED HER HOLLYWOOD STRIPES—BUT AT HEART, SHE’S STILL A DOWN-TO-EARTH POLISH GIRL FROM MILWAUKEE BY ELISA DRAKE

You can take the girl out of Milwaukee, but you can’t, as they say, take Milwaukee out of the girl—and Jane Kaczmarek wouldn’t have it any other way. Born and raised in Brew City and the second of four siblings, the award-winning actress got an education degree in case acting didn’t pan out, but she majored in theater at the University of Wisconsin and never looked back. Besides her seven-time-Emmy-nominated role on “Malcolm in the Middle,” Kaczmarek, 53, has appeared on Broadway (“Lost in Yonkers”) and in more than 40 television series, from “Hill Street Blues” to “Frasier” to “Felicity.” Her latest gig is as no-nonsense Judge Trudy Kessler on the current Steven Bochco TNT drama “Raising the Bar.”

With an L.A. lifestyle but a Midwestern mentality, Kaczmarek and actor-husband (and Madison, Wis. native) Bradley Whitford (“West Wing”) chose Pasadena to settle down with their three children Frances, 11, George, 9, and Mary Louisa, 6. “It’s as close to the Midwest as you can get in California,” Kaczmarek says. Her working-mom schedule also includes running Clothes Off Our Back, a charity she and Whitford founded in 2002 to raise money for children’s organizations. Still, nothing keeps Kaczmarek from jetting back to Milwaukee, where her mom and dad still live in the Greendale, Wis., house she grew up in from 7th grade on. We caught up with Kaczmarek by phone to chat about her Milwaukee memories—and her undying love of Polish sausage.

GB: What was Greendale like?

JK: I lived on the south side of Milwaukee until 7th grade, then moved to Greendale, a real bedroom community. It started after the Depression, one of these real ideal communities—street names started with the letters of the alphabet, like Azalea, Acorn, etc., and as it grew, the alphabet continued, so you always knew where someone lived.

GB: Do your kids enjoy visiting their grandparents?

JK: My kids love Wisconsin. We were in Italy on a trip, and then went to Wisconsin and they said, why can’t we just go to Wisconsin? They play in Grandma and Grandpa’s house, which is kind of idyllic with a big back yard, and my dad mows the lawn on his big rider mower, and they hang out the laundry on a line outside, which my kids think is fabulous ... and my daughters love to sleep in the little twin beds my sister and I slept in ... You want to go to all these exciting places when you grow up, but then you get there and you realize there’s really nothing like the Midwest. We always go back for the Fourth of July; [our kids] go on the jet skis and we barbecue and they catch fireflies in jars and play ping pong in the basement.

GB: Have you done any theater in Milwaukee?

JK: I did a Spalding Gray play [“Stories Left to Tell”] with Theater Gigante, for-

merly Milwaukee Dance Theatre ... I also did an event for The Park People, a group dedicated to preserving Milwaukee parks. It’s one of the things I remember the most about growing up: You went to the park ... It was the place you really went to run around, the swimming pools, the picnics. It was the German and Polish immigrants who really built the parks.

GB: I understand you’re a big Polish sausage fan.

JK: I love Polish sausages. I love classical music and I’m part of the [Los Angeles-based] Paderewski Music Society, and they hold a piano competition in Poland every year. I had a concert in my home with this year’s winner ... and I served Polish sausage. My favorite is Klement’s Fresh. You have to boil them for 20 minutes, then they’re browned—we have them at Christmas and Easter and there are always some at Thanksgiving too.

GB: What else do you do in Milwaukee?

JK: You always have to decide Kopp’s or Leon’s [frozen custard], so you end up eating two a day in the taste-test.

GB: Anything else you’d like to add about growing up in Milwaukee?

JK: I can’t tell you how fond I am of Milwaukee—it’s a hometown I’m really proud to be from ... It keeps me grounded.

