

written by stephanie hunt • portraits by squire fox

the good

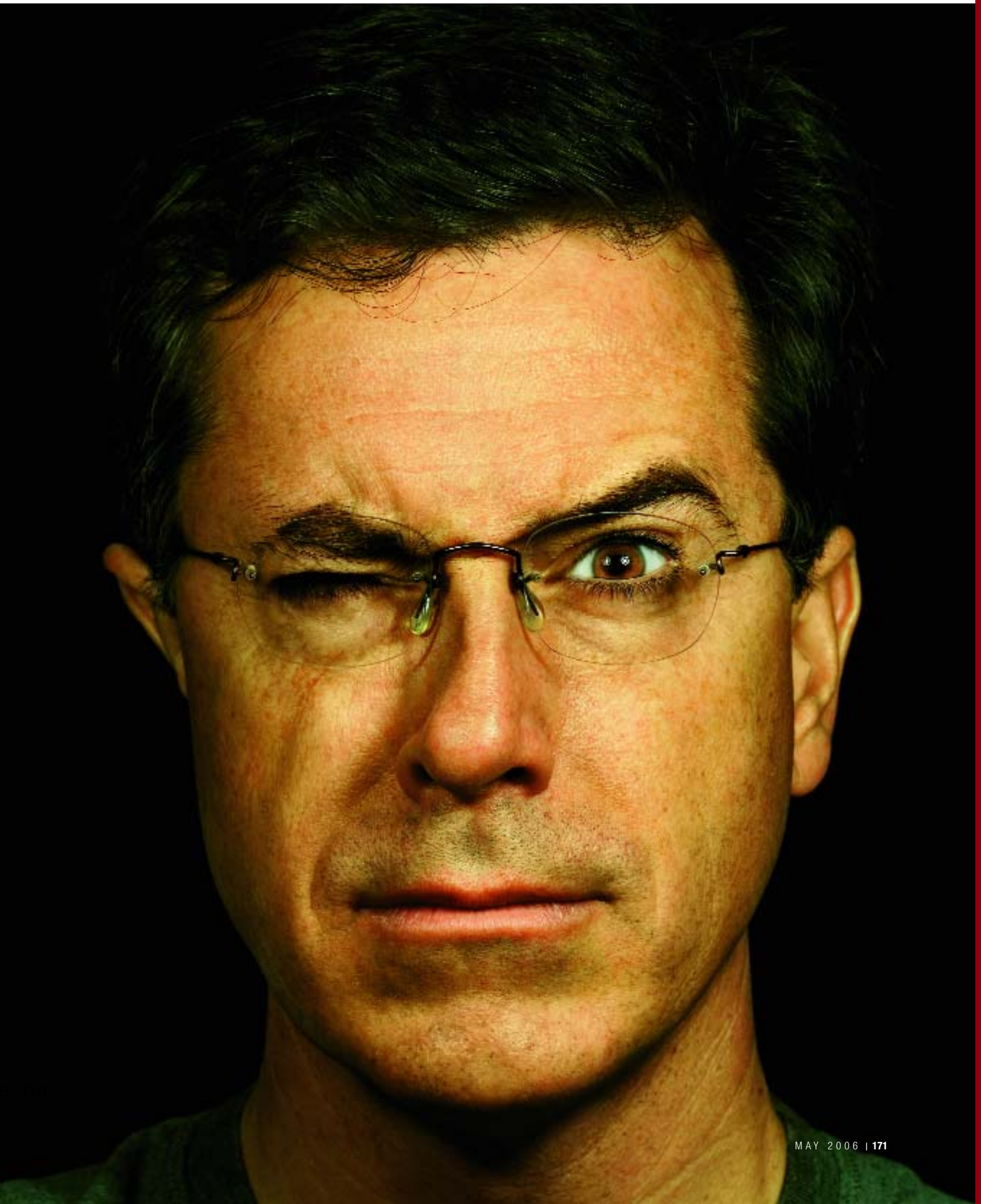
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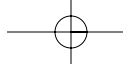
OR

man

**Stephen Colbert**

He's not an ultra-conservative, finger-pointing idiot—he just plays one on TV. Meet the





t's been a banner year—make that a billboard year—for Stephen Colbert. With cock-sure, straight-laced patriotic swagger, a larger-than-life Colbert looks down from a mountaintop onto New York's Times Square. "The Colbert Report—It's what Lincoln would have watched," the two-story billboard proclaims. Several blocks away on West 54th Street, hip, youngish fans gather beneath the blue "Colbert Report" studio awning, waiting for tickets to see their hero—with his expertly arched brow and searing wit—in action. A million and a half others across this great land tune in to Comedy Central at 11:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday to watch the eagle land just for Colbert. "MegaAmerican," "Fearless," "Relentless" flash across the screen as the show begins.



A Times Square billboard is one sign of Colbert's success. 1.5 million viewers tuning in each evening is another. In God's name, the Emmy Award-winning Colbert launched his own program this past October. Airing immediately after *The Daily Show*—hosted by Jon Stewart—*The Colbert Report*, which occupies the former *Daily Show* studio, began by riding

Stewart's wake. "I prefer to think of *The Daily Show* as the warm-up for *The Colbert Report*, you know, the appetizer before the main meal," Colbert wags. These days, he's creating his own wake.

What Jon Stewart is to the news, Colbert is to the media. Or in his words: "As warmth is to the sun, I am to truth." His shtick is an over-the-top self-righteous parody of bull-headed conservative pundits like Bill O'Reilly, Joe Scarborough, and Sean Hannity, and Colbert's dead-on media mockery has made the Charleston native a darling of the press. Recent stories in *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *60 Minutes*, and *Men's Vogue* among others have lauded his talent and tracked his rising fame. In the last year alone, in addition to creating, starring in, and producing his own show, he coined the Word of the Year—"Truthiness" (as pro-

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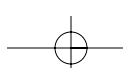


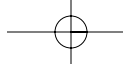
PHOTOGRAPH BY ETHAN MILLER/BETTY IMAGES

The cast of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* after their Emmy win in September 2005. From left: Stephen Colbert, Rob Corddy, Jon Stewart, Ed Helms, and Samantha Bee



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOEL JEFFERIES

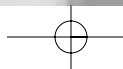


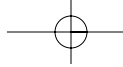


On *The Colbert Report*,  
Stephen Colbert is a clean-cut,  
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Stephen Colbert.



The real Stephen and his on-air persona (as represented by daughter Madeleine's cardboard cutout) would



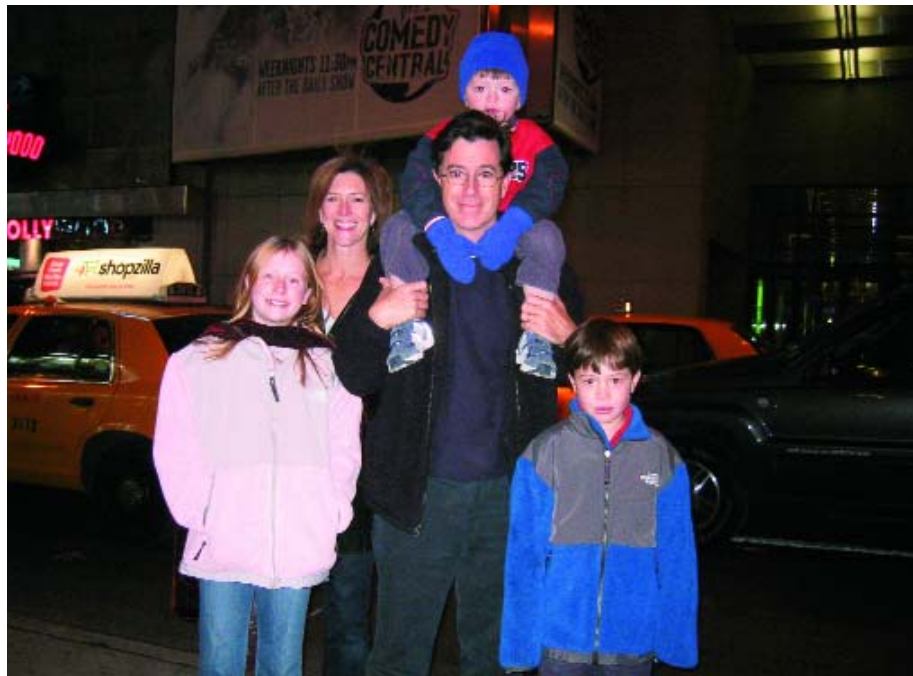


claimed by the American Dialect Society), had a movie premiere (*Bewitched*, starring Nicole Kidman), signed a book deal, hosted the infamous White House Correspondent's Dinner, and has another movie, *Strangers With Candy*, opening this summer. Not bad for the runner-up of the 1981 Charleston County High School Debate Championship. And not surprising, either, say those who knew him way back when.

"Stephen was always well-mannered, well-spoken, and very fast on his feet," says former Porter Gaud music teacher and Glee Club director Ben Hutto, who is now director of performing arts at St. Albans School for Boys and National Cathedral School for Girls in Washington, D.C. "He was a cut-up in high school, and everyone was fair game, but the things that make his on-air persona endearing are the same things that were endearing about him as a student. He was witty, insightful, sharp, clever, charming, and personable, and great at exposing others' vulnerable points without being mean-spirited or derogatory." According to Chip Hill, Colbert's close friend, high school buddy, and godfather to one of Colbert's sons, "Stephen has a magnetic personality," he says of the one-time Dungeons & Dragons fanatic. "He was so funny—he made it cool to be smart and kind of geeky. He loved science fiction and fantasy. He always said he was going to major in mass communications and start his own cult."

### Road to the Report

Judging by the number of fan blogs and Colbert-related websites (including Colbert Nation, [www.colbertnation.com](http://www.colbertnation.com), where you can buy merchandise, download a Stephen screensaver or get Stephen podcasts on iTunes), he got his wish. The success of Colbert's faux news show (pronounced with faux French inflection: "cole-BEAR reh-PORE") has catapulted the boy whose 1982 senior yearbook superlative was "Wittiest" into the esteemed fraternity of late-night comedians. Move over David, Jay, Conan, and Jon, and make way for Stephen. The only difference is, he's not Stephen. Or not exactly.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF STEPHEN & EVELYN COLBERT

Stephen and wife Evie with children Madeleine, 10, John Paul,

On *Letterman* and *Leno*, Letterman plays Letterman and Leno is Leno—what you see is what you get. On *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert is a clean-cut, button-downed, finger-pointing, ultra-conservative, high-status idiot who only looks and sounds like Stephen Colbert. The real Colbert is a clean-cut, buttoned-down, highly intelligent, moderately liberal practicing Catholic, husband, and father of three who loves *The Lord of the Rings*, Sullivan's Island, and all things Charleston. In character, he grills unwitting members of Congress and celebrity guests, such as Al Franken, Connie Chung, Susan Sarandon, and Arianna Huffington, with impassioned and hardly impartial questions ("George Bush—a great president, or the greatest president?"), but he sends them home with a thank-you basket full of Lowcountry goodies. He finds that Mrs. Sassard's Artichoke Relish, benne wafers, lemon cookies, Sticky Fingers BBQ sauce, Buster's Rub, and red rice mix make sweet amends.

This May, Colbert is scheduled to take part in the opening ceremonies of the 30th annual Spoleto Festival USA, which will mark both a personal and professional

homecoming. He met his wife, Charlestonian and fellow actor Evelyn (Evie) McGee Colbert, at the Spoleto opening of Philip Glass's *Hydrogen Jukebox* in 1990. He and his mother once shared the stage as extras in a Spoleto opera. And though he dabbled in plays at Porter Gaud and the Footlight Players, Colbert credits the festival with launching his showbiz career.

"I got my start at Spoleto in 1982. Menotti needed a teenage actor after a cast member dropped out, and I auditioned and got the gig. I played the gay lover of the king in *The Leper*," he recounts. "It was fantastic—these professional New York actors were very encouraging to me. They said, 'You know, you could do this for a living.' No one had ever said 'You could do this' to me about anything. I was not a particularly good student," Colbert adds.

After two years at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, Colbert transferred to Northwestern University to study theater and performance at the prestigious School of Communication. "I realized acting was the one thing I really worked hard at. I was determined to be a serious actor, an insufferable 'let me share my misery with you' kind of

actor," he says. But his script didn't play out that way. "I just kind of fell into what I do," he says. "By happy accident," Colbert met improv icon Del Close and discovered his own knack for improvisational comedy, performing at Chicago's Improv Olympics and Annoyance Theatre (where Mike Myers and the late Chris Farley also got their starts). After graduation, Colbert's first job—answering phones for improv troupe Second City—turned into a seven-year-long affiliation with the company where he was a writer, performer, and understudy for Steve Carell, now known for his role in TV's *The Office*.

Eventually Colbert, along with his Second City collaborators Amy Sedaris and Paul Dinello, left Chicago for New York, where they created the sketch comedy *Exit 57* for HBO Downtown Productions and the surreal TV series *Strangers with Candy*, a spoof on sappy, moralistic after-school specials (the trio are co-writers/producers/stars of the movie premiering this summer, featuring Sarah Jessica Parker and Philip Seymour Hoffman). Although Colbert's many credits include stints on *The Dana Carvey Show*, *Saturday Night Live*, and even *Good Morning America*, the offer to work on *The Daily Show* came during a year-long dry spell. Somewhat desperate, with a wife and young baby at home, Colbert took the job, "but I thought the show was a terrible idea," he admits. "Then I



Whether they pronounce it "Cole-burt" or "Cole-bear," Stephen (at bottom in blue coat) and his 11 brothers and sisters have

got there and realized this was a great group working really hard, and I learned to love the people I was working with. Though I left for three years in the middle, I was so happy to come back for the 2000 campaign. By that time Jon (Stewart) had taken over, and boy, what a great show he's developed."

### Family Entertainment

Charleston fans in particular might identify with some of *The Colbert Report's* antics: For instance, Stephen's South-of-Broad-ish portrait within a portrait within a portrait that hangs above the set's faux fireplace ("Ah, status. My character, much like Charleston, definitely has the status thing going," he notes). The show's core audience, however, is more the young, intellectual Blue State folks than

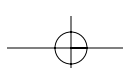
your typical traditional-values Charleston viewer. Nonetheless, Colbert does have a die-hard contingent here among the family-values crowd. Namely, his own family.

Stephen's mother, Lorna Colbert, and brother and sister and their respective broods all live in the area, as do his in-laws, Peter and Patty McGee, and sister-in-law, Madeleine McGee. As the youngest of 11 children ("JimEdMaryBillMargoTomJay ElizabethPeterPaulStephen," which he rattles off in a hilarious breathless slur), Stephen never lacked an audience, or competition. "All my children are funny," says Lorna, who herself aspired to be an actress before being sidetracked by 11 children. "Our name might be French, but I swear they're Irish. Once we took a vote on who was the funniest, and



PHOTOGRAPHS (2) COURTESY OF STEPHEN & EVELYN COLBERT

Stephen in a 1983 Spoleto



Stephen was way down on the list.”

Jay, the seventh in line and a seventh-grade social studies teacher in Dorchester County, claims his baby brother was always entertaining. “There was the incident on my father’s birthday—Stephen wasn’t even three yet. I heard this excited voice coming from the dining room, and went to look in, and son of a gun if there weren’t two perfect little footprints right in the middle of the cake and a trail of frosting leading out the door! But my father let it go, he adored Stephen—they were especially tight,” says Jay. Tragically, Dr. Colbert, an immunologist at MUSC, and two of Stephen’s brothers, Paul and Peter, were killed in an airplane crash in 1974 on their way back to boarding school in Connecticut. Stephen was 10 years old. The loss was devastating, but served to strengthen the already-tight Colbert bond.

“We’re a very close family. There’s nothing we like better than getting together,” says Jay. When they do, laughs are constant and conversation is lively. “No one is shy in my family. They jump right in,” says Mrs. Colbert, adding that Stephen often cooks for the clan, whipping up meals with typical improvisational flair.

“I never had a doubt that Stephen would be successful. Even when he was starving in Chicago, back when he took cream and sugar in his coffee because ‘it’s food,’ I knew he’d make it,” his proud mom says. “I love the show. I think it’s fantastic—it means I get to visit with my son every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday night!”



In 2005, Stephen served as head chef, chaplain, and chief morale officer for Team Tao aboard a boat crewed by his friends in the Charleston to

My character **cares** deeply about issues, he just **doesn't know** much about them. Who **needs facts** when you've got the **right inflection?**



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIN CROOK

### Staying Tuned In

Of course, the downside for the bluffing star is that he rarely gets to spend evenings with his own three children, Madeleine, 10, Peter, seven, and John Paul, four. Producing 22 minutes of on-camera, original comedy four nights a week, 42 weeks a year is daunting (91 people work on the show),

and it means Colbert “only get spurts of family time, for now anyway,” he says. Still, his wife and the kids are priority. The “billboard dad” will forgo an opportunity to appear on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* if it means making it to son Peter’s swim meet.

When they do get time off, the Colberts spend much of it, including six weeks in

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JOEL JEFFERIES

the summer, with their extended family in Charleston and on Sullivan's Island. "We both share a love of Charleston; it's so much a part of who we are," Evie says. Last year Stephen joined a crew of old Charleston friends for the Charleston to Bermuda sailboat race. He was head chef, chaplain, and chief morale officer for

what he does when he's in town, the pithy fake pundit turns downright eloquent: "Once I cross the Ben Sawyer Bridge, I try not to cross back over. I try not to drive. I try not to wear long pants. I try to go swimming, no matter what time of year it is. I go fishing. When I was a kid, there was a Japanese monster TV show called *Ultra*

All the faux news that's fit to green-brown water. I have to get muddy. I have to smell low tide. I have to eat oysters; I have to catch my dinner. I have to do it. We spend as much time in Charleston as we can, so our children will know how to

**I love the show means I get to visit with my son every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday night!"**—Lorna Colbert

Team Tao, which finished a respectable tenth in the 21-boat pack, despite the unpleasant misfortune of a broken toilet and sump pump on their second day out. Colbert, the consummate good sport, did much of the messy bailing—bathroom humor comes in handy.

Though laughter may be the best medicine, pluff mud has its place. When asked

*Man*. Ultra Man could do anything, fighting monsters in his big silvery suit, but he could only fight so long before he had to return to his solar system to be recharged by the light of his home sun. That's what it's like for me—I've got to go home every so often to be recharged by my home sun. It's medicinal for me to float in a creek. It's necessary. I have to get under the water, that

crab, how to open an oyster, and what low tide smells like. Those were the things that were inexplicable to the people my wife and I dated before we met each other: They were poetic expressions we could give, merely by appreciating each other's love of the Lowcountry."

Truthiness aside, that's the real Stephen Colbert.

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