

## Finding the Humor with Phil Callaway

**Candace Dellacona:** Welcome to the Sandwich Generation Survival Guide. I am your host, Candace Dellacona, and I am here with our esteemed guest, Phil Kellway. I am so happy to have you here, Phil. I am so happy to be here, Candace. Thanks for having me. My pleasure. For our listeners, I just want to share with them why I am so excited to have you on the podcast today.

**Candace Dellacona:** So I'm going to maybe embarrass you a little and share a little bit about who you are and the accolades. So you are an award winning author. I know you've written almost 30 books. I think I read 27 books, if I'm correct, bestseller lists. You speak often on various topics having to do with family and faith and finding the humor in really difficult things.

**Candace Dellacona:** I know you're a husband, you're a dad of three, you have 14 grandkids, you reside in Canada, and you are a guest on national radio and TV. So we're really, really thrilled to have you here, Phil.

**Phil Callaway:** Thrilled to be here. Thank you. I think most of that was true. I'm just a guy who's really surprised at all of this having happened and, uh, I'm very grateful to cheer people up is sort of my lifelong goal, I guess, and find myself doing that a lot.

**Candace Dellacona:** So why don't we talk about that, Phil? How did you sort of find this niche in life, in your vocation, I would say, because it seems to have a nice calling. Kind of fill us in on your background and how you got here.

**Phil Callaway:** Yeah. I was that kid in the second graded classroom who. You know, just was not doing what he was supposed to do.

**Phil Callaway:** And the teacher would sort of single out and say, go stand over there by the pencil sharpener in those days. And, uh, I didn't have a clue that you could make a living at this. I remember when I was. Just about five or so I said to my mother I said I'd like to grow up and be a comedian and she said well you can't do both and she was right, you know, you can't do what I do and Entirely grow up.

**Phil Callaway:** So I spent a long time at this. I wrote my first book 31 years ago Uh, it was published in the U. S., it was called Honey, I Dunked the Kids, and that was sort of in the wake of the Honey, I Shrunk the Kids hit at Disney. And people started to get the thing, and I had not a clue that they, they would. I thought my mother will buy eight copies and give it to aunts I have never met.

**Phil Callaway:** But instead, this thing overnight was a hit, and they started to call. People wanted me to speak, and I was terrified, Candice. I just was. I just, I never wanted to do that. I could make, you know, a handful of kids laugh in a classroom. But to do this in front of a few hundred people, uh, it freaked me out. But I finally, somebody said to me, would you come and make us laugh?

**Phil Callaway:** And I finally said yes. I thought, I can do that. I've been doing that since fifth grade. My teacher, Miss Ida Weissmuller, this fierce, tall, German woman, she said, you know, she was sick of me by September the 3rd, but I remember her saying these words to me. Terrible, Candace. She said, uh, there's a bus leaving in 10 minutes.

**Phil Callaway:** Be under it. You know, that's sort of the way I like it in the classroom. And, uh, but, uh, from there, I, I remember telling this lady who asked me, come make us laugh. Would you do that? And I said, I think I can. If you need a reference, call Miss Ida Weissmuller. She's still alive. Uh, she knows that I make people laugh.

**Phil Callaway:** But that's been such a joy, and the irony of it is life hasn't been easy all the time, so I need to laugh myself.

**Candace Dellacona:** Yeah, I love your focus on finding the humor and helping other people in finding the humor and really looking for these joyful moments in life. As you point out, it's not always easy. That's what makes it life.

**Candace Dellacona:** As Sandwich Generation members, our listeners, us, you know, you started out writing stories about your children and finding the humor in it. And we talk often about In addition to being caregivers, and we're going to get to that story because I know you have a really remarkable story about that as well.

**Candace Dellacona:** And of course, your best selling book, The Family Squeeze, which I can't wait to talk about. But what is it about humor? Do you think? That makes it self care for those of us in the sandwich generation.

**Phil Callaway:** Well, as you know, entire books have been written about this and the physiology of it. I just, I guess, anecdotally, I have seen it transform people.

**Phil Callaway:** I have watched people come to me after I speak. And they will invariably say to me, I had not laughed since They'll name a date. And I'll ask them, so what, what happened then? And they'll tell me, you know, a spouse died, a child died, over and over and over, and they'll say, thank you for making me laugh. The irony in this is that I get comments from people in letters and emails, and sometimes phone calls.

**Phil Callaway:** A guy who said, you shouldn't be laughing, these are hard times. What's with that? I said to him, is that you dad? But the truth is I told him, do you realize my wife lost five immediate family members in one year thanks to Huntington's disease and cancer. So if I didn't laugh, I don't know where I'd be if I didn't have hope, if I didn't have a way of moving forward.

**Phil Callaway:** And laughter does that for us. It's like windshield wipers. It doesn't stop the rain. But it helps us move ahead and, uh, over and over I see this happen. I'm telling you, Candace, sometimes I get letters that just make me cry. Yeah. Because I realize that somehow you've touched a cord within someone who was just longing for maybe the permission to laugh.

**Phil Callaway:** Uh, I was speaking at an event recently, uh, for victims of families of murder victims. And to be able to say to them, your loved one would want you to laugh. And part of the sandwich generation is, we got a lot of stuff that's hard, and we go, laugh. So, you also, you know these things about it being better than an hour of rowing, five minutes of laughter.

**Phil Callaway:** I just read the other day, brand new study, 50 percent increase in blood flow. When we have laughed, so they were doing a study showing people the great movie, Saving Private Ryan, which my wife and I watched recently. And then afterwards, they had that same group watch 15 minutes of some great comedy. And they measured the difference in them.

**Phil Callaway:** And that was one of the areas was in, in blood flow. And we all could use an increase in blood flow at my age. I can at the age of 62 for sure.

**Candace Dellacona:** I mean, likewise, but going back to these life experiences that you've shared along the way, I know that part of your identity is as a devoted spouse, and you write often, um, about how much you adore your wife, you've been with her for so long, and to be alongside of someone who has sustained that level of grief to such a devastating illness, and yet still finding the humor, I think that's Pretty remarkable.

**Candace Dellacona:** Do you think, Phil, that you, in having your career as a humorist, as a writer in humor, that you were able to help your wife sort of transition out of her grief, even for brief moments?

**Phil Callaway:** Oh, I think so. I saw that often. Part of our story also is of her having grand mal seizures for years. So, it's not an easy thing to laugh during those times for either of you, but we were talking about this the other day, I'm, I'm dealing with a ski accident, having skied with my grandson and a torn meniscus, I think I might have told you, Candice, earlier, but uh, you're, you're looking at this and there isn't a whole lot to laugh about, but here we are still able to do that.

**Phil Callaway:** And I think the key to a good marriage is that when one of you is struggling, the other somehow finds a way to not be and to cheer the other up. And so that's certainly what she's doing right now.

**Candace Dellacona:** That's, yeah, I mean, that's what you hope. And as members of the Sandwich Generation, in addition to caring for our kids and caring for our older loved ones, we still have relationships with our peer level, our spouse, our partner in life.

**Candace Dellacona:** So it's really important to find the laughter with them, too, to find the joy that. So that you have the energy and maybe the presence to be able to become the caretaker. So I think this is a perfect sort of transition to talk to you about the family squeeze and your book that you wrote based on your own experience.

**Candace Dellacona:** So please fill us in how this book came to fruition, what it means to you. I loved sharing about it before, and I want to share that with our listeners.

**Phil Callaway:** Yeah, for sure. We wrote some books and they were hits and suddenly we were saying, boy, I wrote a book called making life rich without any money. And ironically, it made me a lot of money.

**Phil Callaway:** So we decided, well, Hey, number one, let's build a house. We were renting at the time. And so we bought that and, or we were having that built. And my wife said something very odd to me one night. She said, you know, your parents are struggling. They're in their mid seventies. Uh, they're looking at a place.

**Phil Callaway:** They want to move. They can't take care of their place any longer. And she said to me, why don't we build a suite for them? And I said, you mean on someone else's house? Uh, where? And she said, no, you know, we can do that. I said, you know, would we have really good deadbolts between the, between us, and she said sure, and thick walls so they can't hear us, and oh sure, whatever.

**Phil Callaway:** But she was kind of the one who felt that we need to honor our parents, and she was doing that with her mother in different ways. But, I later learned 47 percent of adults in their 40s and 50s have a parent 65 or older. This is from a couple of years ago that I read this, and are either raising a young child or financially supporting a grown child that's 18 and over.

**Phil Callaway:** You have probably more recent stats than this, Candice, but 15 percent are providing financial support to both an aging parent and a child. 21 percent have provided financial support to a parent age 65. And older, uh, in the past year. So, there we are, and I started to think about this and talk to others, and some people thought, You're nuts!

**Phil Callaway:** What are you doing? My favorite part of my parents coming to visit with us is driving them to the airport, you know? And, uh, here I am, but The truth is, we'd had this great relationship through the years, as did my wife with my parents, and so it wasn't that difficult of a decision. I had read George Washington Carver.

**Phil Callaway:** This great quote from him, uh, hopefully I can remember it, How far we go in life depends on being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong, because someday we will have been all of these. And that was a huge deal for me. And I, I just was not expecting people to respond as they have to our story.

**Phil Callaway:** It's not a story of trying to guilt people in any way. Some of us are able to do this or not. And when we made this decision, we had no idea that Alzheimer's was ahead. We didn't. Uh, we hadn't planned for that. But we knew that we wanted to honor our parents, uh, without guilt and raise our own kids without regret.

**Phil Callaway:** At this same time, it was a little bit like living on a NASCAR track. We had three teenagers at the time, and then my parents about 20 steps away. But, uh, I guess a big part of my life has been trying to figure out, as I get a little older, what is my legacy? What will people remember? And there are only a few of them we'll remember.

**Phil Callaway:** But I want my kids to remember that I did the right thing. So that was the start of our journey.

**Candace Dellacona:** Right. And so, in sort of endeavoring to maybe memorialize this experience, having aging loved ones reside with you no matter how fantastic the relationship is, and you are so lucky to have had that, and anyone who does sort of share that bond with you, where it's not a difficult family relationship, and the ability for space and all of the things that go along with it, what sort of made you decide to then write about it?

**Phil Callaway:** Well, a publisher called me and said, Hey, what, what are you dealing with these days? Yeah. I started telling him this story, right? And I told him, I mean, last Wednesday, my father put a big tub of ice cream in the dryer and we're going down this journey we never thought we were going to be on. My mother is telling me, Dad's not right.

**Phil Callaway:** Something's going on. He's not, he's losing it. Uh, he told me that he had never had the job that he had for 30 years. And so that's another chapter altogether, right, of rusting the car keys away from your father and all this thing. And so my publisher friend said, write about it. And I hung up on him and he called me right back and he said, no, I'm serious.

**Phil Callaway:** You got to do this. So that's where. Family Squeeze came from, and I just, uh, as I mentioned earlier, Tales of Hope and Hilarity for a Sandwiched Generation. I've never been able to write seriously for very long, so a lot of this book is, uh, finding ways of laughing, you know. I, um, try to remember, I had come up with a list of a whole bunch of things that, uh, I'm thankful for at my age.

**Phil Callaway:** And you've got to think this way because you realize life insurance salesmen, they don't call you anymore. Uh, your plaid pants are back in style, you know, whatever. So I would write these lists down, things that I wish my kids would say, Hey dad, I'll pay the phone bill this month. New movies aren't cool.

**Phil Callaway:** Let's watch something old. Uh, yeah. Yeah. I love it. This is my room, but it's your house, whatever. So there are these lists in here. Things that can kind of help keep us sane and, uh, that's really the theme of this book. Can we find sanity and success in the sandwiched years? And my answer is yes. Uh, there are certain steps we can take to do that.

**Candace Dellacona:** Just going back to something that you just briefly touched on, which I think is really important for our listeners, right, where you were able to, to have your parents live with you and you had the space and the means to do it and they wanted to do it, but you had mentioned that your wife was also. And I think it's really important that our listeners think about the fact that there are different ways that you can help and it doesn't always look like perhaps having somebody move in with you.

**Candace Dellacona:** Sometimes it can be financial support. Sometimes it can be, uh, the shuttle back and forth to the doctor and that still looks like a successful sandwich generation task, right?

**Phil Callaway:** Exactly, yeah, and I, see I'm youngest of five, and it was sort of, call it what you will, my lot in this, it worked out, and the others were, thankfully, they were 100 percent on board, uh, and they did what they could at times.

**Phil Callaway:** But, sometimes it's down to one of us saying, no, this is, this is what I need to do. In my wife's case, her, her mother, uh, and stepdad lived a significant distance away and that was never an option. So they didn't live with us. And that's fine. And I, I'm telling you, if you're listening today, that this is not a guilt trip.

**Phil Callaway:** I mean, man, man, this time of life, there's so much, there's anxiety. We're trying to do so many things. And we wake up in the morning and there's guilt on the pillow beside us. You know, I, I grew up in poverty, really, below the poverty line, and the only trips that we could afford were guilt trips. Um, so that's kind of the way it was.

**Phil Callaway:** But I realized there, there's, uh, just do what you can. Right. Sometimes that's making that once a week phone call, and yeah, it's going to take a half hour. Yeah. But could be the brightest half hour. of a parent's life, and there's also the thought of this is going to be me before too long, right? I'm aware of this.

**Phil Callaway:** So we, I think, uh, Candice, you know, I'm sitting right here. The suite is just over here from me. It's our office now. But our kids, every single night in their teenage years, would go through these doors, two doors, And they'd, they'd tap on the door often. Sometimes they'd play a practical joke, like get the remote and dad would be watching TV and they'd be clicking the channels around.

**Phil Callaway:** Dad probably didn't help him, uh, when he needed to be helped. With dementia, yeah. Yeah. But they would go in there, they'd watch a football game with them. Uh, they would, they would have supper with them, or dessert. And they, all three of them, have told us they will never forget those days. My daughter, Rachel, has said, Grandma was my hero.

**Phil Callaway:** Each of them have said to us, We want you to live with us now. Whenever that time comes, the three of them, and their spouses, are saying that's what we want to do. So, I don't know. We may run away from home before that happens, but there are

**Candace Dellacona:** other things, yeah. Oh, sorry. Sorry to interrupt, Phil. I mean, one of the things that you're sort of glossing over probably earnestly is the fact that you modeled for your kids kindness and compassion, uh, and extending yourself in a way to care for your parents.

**Candace Dellacona:** And it's seeped in, right, to your children. And that's really a remarkable thing as well.

**Phil Callaway:** Well, it's primarily how kids learn, which can be good and can be not so good, but we model the behavior we want our kids to embrace, and that seems to really pay off. Our kids are, they're doing well, each of them, uh, it's, it's remarkable just to see them thrive.

**Phil Callaway:** With their spouses and I was speaking recently at an event where I said that according to a new study You can live four years longer by staying married and a guy came up to me and he said that thing about the four years He said that just seems longer. He said He said yeah, that's just four more years of misery I said, well that's up to some that's up to you And he said what's your secret?

**Phil Callaway:** I said, well, you know number one we We laugh lots. And when you grow old, all your wrinkles are going to be in the right places when you laugh lots. And you



have to in our relationships, right? I mean, my wife says to me, you want breakfast in bed, sleep in the kitchen. Uh, that's funny. You laugh. One guy said, I would never laugh at my wife.

**Phil Callaway:** Like you need to, you go ahead and laugh. And it doesn't make all the difference. Uh, but the, and then the, the other thing and why I'm telling you this is. Here's a little bit of a motto for us has been don't jump from the train when you're in a tunnel. Because none of these things are easy that we're choosing when we're choosing the right thing.

**Phil Callaway:** It can be difficult. And so in our relationships, in sometimes the job, we need to, to remember that we, we want to be faithful. We want to be remembered that way.

**Candace Dellacona:** I think that's really important. And one of the things that you said to me that really stuck with me in our last conversation, Phil, you said that your parents couldn't stay with you the whole time, right?

**Candace Dellacona:** That there was this some certain amount of time where it worked, where they were in your home. And the thing that stuck with me and I thought was so beautiful was you said that was a great success. And I was really struck by that and I'll tell you why. I have so many clients, adult children of the aging generation who endeavor to do what you and your wife did and opened up your home and, and tried to create an alternate way to live together.

**Candace Dellacona:** And the feeling when you can no longer care for someone independently, and perhaps they have to move on. As Sandwich Generation's members, as you said, guilt, having them leave your home in a way that you hadn't anticipated can sometimes feel like a failure. And you said the opposite. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Phil Callaway:** Yeah, yeah. And it's interesting you say that because I'll be honest, I felt and still do at times that I didn't do things right. I got some of them right, some I didn't. And yet Ramona, my wife, is quick to say, Oh, no, you know what? You're being hard on yourself. We did what we could. What do you do when your father doesn't know exactly where he is, when he turns the microwave oven to You know, a hundred minutes or whatever the top thing is, and the house is open in the winter, and we're in cold Canada, and he's just left the front door open and turned up the fireplace as high as he can.

**Phil Callaway:** We started to realize that it was a danger to have our parents in our home, and that's a hard time. So he asked me sometimes, uh, mom kind of lost it first, where she had to go into the hospital and stay there. She'd been on some pretty heavy medication, and then she just took herself off the medication, and there she was.



**Phil Callaway:** She came in the middle of the night into our room and flipped the lights on and said all kinds of strange things, so we had to get her some help. Yeah. Then dad was left with us, so he was having meals with us, and we did the best, and then realized, no, it's in his best interest to be in a place where there are others his age, and where there are incredible health care professionals that can help.

**Phil Callaway:** So we did that. That day came when I had to take the car keys away and had to say dad, you know, He said, is it money? Because we hadn't been charging them anything. It was just, they were, he had the checkbook with him. He said, you write out the amount and it's, oh dad, no. Dad, you remember I said to him, Do you remember when your dad lived with us for a short time?

**Phil Callaway:** And how you had to put him into a long term care facility. And for that brief moment, the lights came on. And we were able to get dad into this care home. And it wasn't all easy after that or anything. But what a burden was lifted when others stepped into the picture.

**Candace Dellacona:** So, in describing all of that, Phil, and feeling how you did, obviously, you adored your parents, and Ramona felt the same way, and the kids felt the same way, and so, you know, many would feel having to do that, even for safety reasons, is a painful thing.

**Candace Dellacona:** And I think we have to sort of flip the switch and reframe the narrative and say that's also an act of love. When you're looking to make sure that your dad is among people his own age where he can socialize and he can be safe. Yeah. And so for our listeners, making sure that our loved ones are safe if they can't be in our home or we can't be right there, that's also an act of love.

**Phil Callaway:** It's so true. Such a good point because it is. We love them. I, to this day, I miss them often. They were my biggest encouragers in my writing. So I wouldn't be who I am today without them. Again, don't take guilt from this. Take what we're saying at the heart. We're doing the best we can, and so are our listeners, trying to figure it out.

**Phil Callaway:** But speaking at a caregiver's conference recently, and about taking care of yourself, and so I had a list of, I think, ten things or so, uh, that we can do. Zero. Well, the first one, you've touched on it already, but it's laugh, um, a little each day. And we just need to find a way. Before I was born, my dad, he worked in a psychiatric ward and he would come home at night and he would tell my mom what had happened and he would laugh and she would look at him and say, you can't do that.

**Phil Callaway:** You can't laugh about that. And he would say, if I didn't, I would die. And so this friend James and I, we sometimes we go for coffee or for lunch. And he would tell me stories of his dad, of his dad's, you know, long term care facility and him gently going

after his shoes. And kind of in slow motion fell into the closet and then pushed a beeper on his hip.

**Phil Callaway:** He was okay. But we got lassing and I'm thinking only people like us, you and our listeners, know about that. Yeah. And can laugh about it. But they'd probably lock us up if they knew what we were laughing about. But find a place, you know, find a confidant, I think was, was the second one. Miles Franklin said someone to tell it to is one of the fundamental needs of human beings.

**Phil Callaway:** How true that is, you know, you don't have everyone an organ recital about what you're going through. But to share your story, your thoughts, your feelings, and sometimes your tears with a trusted other is just an absolute gift. So that's a couple of the things, you know, laugh a little each day, find a confidant, that's a big thing.

**Phil Callaway:** There was an old Swedish proverb, shared joy is a double joy. Shared sorrow is half a sorrow, and uh, I think it's so true, sorrow for what's gone, we do that, but joy for what is, and we need that perspective, that good things are ahead as well. So, yeah, I don't know if you have, um, I'd love that,

**Candace Dellacona:** so I'll tell you that.

**Candace Dellacona:** Talking with you and hearing other people's stories and not feeling alone and getting permission to laugh. That's what you've done for so many of your readers. And that's really why I wanted you to join us on the podcast to sort of give permission during this really complicated and very sad sometimes time of life to laugh and look for the joy and take that self care.

**Candace Dellacona:** Be kind to yourself and know that by doing the right thing, you're also helping your kids. And as Sandwich Generation members, that's what we strive to do. So I think that's a perfect way to end. And I just cannot thank you enough, Phil, for your kindness and your positivity and the message that you've sent.

**Phil Callaway:** Well, I want people to know who are listening that they are a great blessing. I am now at the age where we have 16 grandkids. And I'm getting a little older, and it's very important, I'm so grateful when my kids and them take an interest in me, in my advanced stage of life at 62, right? And so it's all kind of coming around.

**Phil Callaway:** And uh, so I just want you to know that you, Candice, and your listeners are a great blessing. There's an old Let, let me give you an old blessing to end with, uh, remember it's, so take a new grip with your tired hands, stand firm on your shaky legs, mark out a straight path for your feet. Then those who follow you, though they are weak and lame will not stumble and fall, but become strong.

**Phil Callaway:** Yeah.

**Candace Dellacona:** God bless you. Great blessing. Thank you so much, Phil. Very welcome.