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JAMIE KENNEDY

THE FILM & TV STAR
TAKES HIS STAND-UP
ON THE ROAD TO
CORPORATE SHOWS
AND PRIVATE EVENTS

PLUS INSIDE:

Coverage of the IACEP
International Conference

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Life In Overdrive **STEVE RIZZO**

STORY BY IAN KIRBY

Steve Rizzo is a motivational speaker and an interesting character. Working for years to build a credible name in the world of stand-up comedy, he was living in L.A. with his room mate at the time, Drew Carey and was at the brink of grabbing every comic's brass ring; the sitcom. What he decided to do next was an unprecedented move that even his roommate couldn't believe.

After spending 18 years as a stand-up comic, he decided it was time for a change. "I spent almost two decades performing comedy and I loved it. I headlined every comedy club in the country, did a lot of TV stuff and got my own Showtime special. Some of my comedy peers at the time who are major stars today told me I was making a mistake because apparently I left at the pinnacle of my career, right when big things started happening."

After spending years developing his craft, toiling in the clubs and clawing his way up, why in Heaven's name would anyone just give that all up? "I just didn't want it anymore. I didn't like what I was becoming and I didn't like the business of show business, but more than that, I just had a calling to do something else. I knew my heart was telling me to go somewhere else, I just didn't know where that was."

The lifestyle of the touring standup comic, while fun, was not leading Steve's life in the productive direction he wanted. "I was partying a little bit too much and the fact that I was then doing something that my heart



wasn't into 100% started to wear on me. I still loved the audience; I love making people laugh, but I thought I should be doing something on a more profound level."

Steve shares the sentiment that sometimes when you're meant to be doing something, things have a way of working themselves out the way they want, and you are just along for the ride. "It's kind of weird. When life is telling you to change and you don't do it, life has ways of making you change."

Steve began the process with intense levels of introspection and self-education. "I started reading many self-help books and then attending a lot of seminars to listen to motivational speakers. I went specifically to many Tony Robbins' programs, which really reached me. As I was watching him, something inside of me said 'You know, I can do that.' After mulling it over for a while, I decided it was something I should pursue."

There are many varieties of performers who have converted their skills from purely an entertainment showcase to include a message to make themselves more marketable in the corporate market, but in Steve's case, changing his primary venues from comedy clubs to corporations was merely a side effect. This inspiration was about effecting positive change; Steve would be just as happy imparting his message on a bus stop bench as at a fancy corporate or social event, as long as the message is getting through. Not everyone can understand this perspective. "In fact, it kind of irks me, because I take this business very seriously, yet I have many comedians call me and ask me to help them get into the speaking business. I say 'absolutely' and as soon as I ask them what they want to speak about and I get a reply like 'I don't know, but I heard the money is good', I know I can't help them."

It's been 15 years now that Steve has been speaking and he hasn't looked back. "It's been a dream come true. It was always wonderful when I did standup and people would come up after the shows and say 'Hey thanks man, I really needed to laugh!' That is always a great feeling, but now I have people approach me and say 'Thanks man, you really helped me to change my life. I have letters and emails from people who are giving back to me and nothing compares with that. I know it

sounds corny to lot of people, but it is what I was put on this planet to do."

When people ask Steve what he does, he tell them he is an attitude adjuster. When asked what this means, he explains that he shows people how to be happy and successful no matter what their current circumstances are. Everyone wants to make a difference of some kind and be the best; few of us have dreams in mediocrity. But, not all of us can be presidents and CEOs. Sometimes, making the best of our lot in life (without completely abandoning ambition) is the best we can do. This is a key point in Steve's delivery. "We may not all be world leaders, but I do believe we all can make a difference if we look at whatever it is we do as being valuable. Many people have that problem, you hear them going 'Oh well, I'm only a plumber and I only got this job because my father did it.' But take a step back and think of what the world would be without plumbers. Every job may not be glamorous, but most are vital in their own way."

Part of doing any job is giving maximal effort to keep any harbored feelings of unfulfilled potential at bay. "I think if you can look at what you do and decide to be the very best you can be at it, you'll look at things with a totally different mindset." Your day is no



longer about trudging through till the whistle blows, but seeing how much more or better you can do from one day to the next.

We could spout off all day about Steve's principles, philosophies and even the specific points of his talk, but those things would be far better learned by doing the smart thing and just booking Steve's presentation. No, in this case, actions speak louder than words, so instead, we think it more appropriate to share a story of Steve's actually walking the walk. "I have been an executive platinum member with American Airlines for a long time and I am one person that when I travel a lot I appreciate when people do things for me and I am loyal to that. I hand gifts out when someone gives me great service, or I'll write a letter to their manager for doing something great. One day, I was speaking Barbara Bell, who worked for American Airlines out of their Connecticut call center. She informed me that because of the economy and cutbacks, they were closing down that entire building and over 500 people were being laid off. She wanted to know if I would send some of my books and DVDs to some of the people there to help them get through the layoff."

Steve decided to do her one better. "I told her I wanted to do more. I wanted to give a seminar to all the employees as a way to help them say goodbye and transition to their next place in life. Immediately she brought up all the potential problems of venue space and the costs involved and I just told her not to worry."

Call it providence, serendipity or just luck, not two hours after Steve was off the phone with Barbara, he received a call. "It was a lady by the name of Diane Goodman. She is president of a speakers agency and sends bookings my way, but usually through my agent, Karen Harris at CMI. She said 'Oh Steve, I don't even know why I called you, I should have just dialed Karen. I just helped her with the info she wanted and we happened to talk about the American Airlines situation. Diane lives in Connecticut and had heard about the layoff in the paper and I told her about the speech I wanted to give and the logistical implications involved. She immediately volunteered to give it a shot, called me back in a couple of hours and had gotten the Mohegan Sun, the biggest casino in the country. Not only did they say they would be more than happy to do it, but they gave us

the cabaret theater room and got a hold of the bus company who would donate shuttle services for the event.”

Then commenced one of our favorite metaphorical clichés from the natural world; the snowball effect. “All of a sudden a PR guy calls and wants to get involved and donate his time. I asked the Passing Zone to pitch in, who are a wonderful and incredible variety act and good friends of mine. They donated a show and opened up for me.”

Steve says even with all of the support, the economic reality of the situation couldn't be escaped. “There was still much expense being incurred, more than we had anticipated. A lot more. Finally we made progress and the press was paying attention, so I started making calls to look for a sponsor. I called Axa Insurance, Morgan Stanley and John Hancock. I had spoken for all of these groups in the past and had kept a solid rapport with them, so they were all very interested. I had to wait a couple of days for an answer.”

Steve's intuition rang again so he picked up the line and made a call. I called a good friend, Al Parinello, who is a producer for movies and television. I explained the situation and asked if he knew any potentially interested parties I could go to for sponsorship funds. He asked me how much I needed, I told him and he said ‘Done.’ Just like that, he paid for it.”

Completing the event only two nights before our conversation in early September, Steve still had a residual glow about him that can only be paralleled to that same aura of peaceful tranquility that surrounds expectant mothers. “It was, without a doubt, the most rewarding thing I have ever done in my 15 years of speaking. These people were in tears with laughter and emotion. When The Passing Zone opened for me, they got four standing ovations. I went up and did an hour of how to get through the tough times, take time to reflect on where they were and get to the next step in their journey.

“The emails I got today and yesterday were just phenomenal. It was an incredibly suc-

cessful thing and now Diane Goodman and I are going to do this on a regular basis. We are going to get some legal council, do it all by the books and create a nonprofit organization to help people who are being laid off in droves all around the country.”

You don't have to be facing a layoff for your audience to be receptive to Steve's invaluable message though. Anyone, from success to tribulation, from CEO to mail clerk can learn from Steve's “attitude adjustment” of positive philosophies and life altering affirmation. Throw in a veteran standup comic's skill and a true willingness to make a difference in the world and you have one great presenter and program. Consider him for your next event today.

BOOK IT! For information on bringing Steve Rizzo to your event, contact Karen Harris at CMI Speakers at (877) 307-7403. For information and live online media in our 3D digital magazine including clips of Steve's work, log on to our website at americanentertainmentmagazine.com

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