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SAM SANDLER:

DEAFinitely Magic

BY HEATHER HIGH-KENNEDY

The illusionist stands on the stage, as the music blares from the speakers and the crowd roars wildly throughout the auditorium. Sam Sandler has captivated yet another audience with his perfectly-timed comedic performance, charming smile and vivacious personality- yet the magician leading the crowd in uproarious delight is an illusion himself.

Deeper, stronger and deaf-er than the man they see on the surface, a man whose footwork masks the ultimate purpose of his feet (which is to feel the musical vibrations that cue his performance), Sandler has evolved as a comedic illusionist in the most unexpected ways- through the losses of his hearing, his home and his wife- and has become an inspirational success in the process.

Sam's career as an entertainer began when he was about 15 years old, and a friend of his father's, who worked as a circus clown, visited their home and started juggling. Mesmerized by the sight, Sam immediately started tossing various items into the air, learning the hard way how to juggle. After about two months of wandering around the backyard, throwing around balls, sticks and any other items light enough to become airborne, he mastered the rhythmical intricacies of the craft. His feet were set on a path as a performer. Soon after, he invented Gizmo the Magic Clown, a birthday party sensation who entertained young children with slapstick physical humor. "I have always loved kids and physical comedy," said Sam, whose father was a pastor who allowed him to practice his skills as a juggler and entertainer by performing for the kids in the church nursery. His comedic talents became more refined as he performed

for the various groups of children.

Shortly after graduating from high school, he got a job working for illusionist Toby Travis and toured with him for two years. It was this experience that encouraged Sam to step beyond the constraints of the juggling clown act, learn magic tricks and become a first-rate comedic illusionist. Once off the road with Travis, though, he found himself back in his hometown, holding down managerial positions at McDonald's and Wendy's, to acquire steady income; nonetheless, he managed to find ways to incorporate his skills while working at Wendy's, pulling out the equipment and performing for lunch crowds one hour a day, and then packing it up and finishing the shift. During one of these lunchtime performances, Sam was approached by an onlooker who asked him why he was working at Wendy's. "He told me, 'I've been out to Las Vegas and you are as good as any performer out there. You are really good,' and that got me thinking." Sam decided to quit his job and become a full-time entertainer.

Though it was a scary prospect, Wendy's gave him six months to try his hand at a full-time career as an illusionist. If, in that time, he decided to return, his old job would be waiting for him. Despite the comfort of that cushion, another frightening element made the move even more daunting: he was married and had a newborn daughter, Tessa. Still, mustering his gumption, Sam decided to take a chance, and in terms of his career, he never turned back.

Soon after taking the plunge and successfully enter-



taining, marketing and accounting for his act on a regular full-time basis, a personal blow changed his life. "When my daughter was six months old, my wife left us. She left me and my daughter, and I have raised her myself ever since." Though the career change and personal devastation occurred nearly simultaneously, Sam does not blame his career. In fact, he said that his magic act has allowed him to raise his daughter and support her financially while also being there for everything she needs.

For the next decade following the dissolution of his marriage, Sam toured with his daughter in tow, bringing her with him wherever he went. In 2009, however, when his daughter was ten years old, another crushing blow nearly destroyed him personally and professionally. What started as a slight hearing loss in 2005 suddenly picked up momentum. The genetic progressive loss rapidly robbed him of what was left of his hearing, mercilessly taking with it all the sounds of his audience, the laughter, the time cues, and the music, as he was thrust - level to level - deeper into silence, from hearing-impaired to profoundly hearing-impaired and then to deaf- all over the course of one fateful year.

The next 18 months were horrific for the man who made his living on the stage in front of people, performing magic tricks that relied upon auditory cues and impeccable timing, and making them laugh in the process. He was overcome with helplessness, crying in the night while struggling to maintain the illusion for his young daughter that he was in control of the situation. Nothing was farther from the truth, as Sam grappled with internal struggles, losing faith in his ability to perform for a crowd when he, himself, could not hear. "Everything came crashing down," he recalled. "I couldn't hear the music. I couldn't hear the laughter. I couldn't talk to people in the show." Unable to call people on the phone or converse with clients, he withdrew. He stopped performing, and by doing that, he stopped making money and couldn't pay his bills. "I lost my house."

That was the turning point for Sam, who realized that he had a big decision to make. "When I lost my house, I realized that enough is enough... I can either move forward or fall behind. I can be successful or not... This can be a stepping stone or a pity party." He decided to work.

With the encouragement of his daughter and his new assistant Christine Hebestadt, a classically trained dancer who formerly worked with Michael Jackson and Will Smith, Sam restructured his show, working with visual cues and tricks that allowed him to deliver a seamless knockout performance, despite the silence that enshrouded him. Sam and Tessa, who also experienced hearing loss of a lesser scale, took sign language classes together, which opened up communication for them, and Christine helped him replace his old auditory signals with new visual tricks. Sam incorporated an element of motivational speaking into the performance, which developed into the present show, DEAFinitely Magic, and they practiced the routine relentlessly until Sam reached a comfort zone where he knew exactly what was supposed to be happening at any given moment of a performance while remaining keen to any unexpected situations that occurred due to audience interaction.

Within a very short period of time, DEAFinitely Magic attracted the attention of thousands of venues, many of which are schools. Sam shines, delighting kids of all ages with his hilarious and engaging act, while also inspiring them with his motivational message. This year, DEAFinitely Magic booked a successful 45-state national tour; Sam has been featured on Good Day Philadelphia and Good Morning America, and there is no end in sight to the magical success of this determined illusionist. Now that the touring schedule has become so vast, Tessa, now a beautiful and strong 15-year-old, has become a large part of Sam's act, most often working as his assistant. "It has been great," says Sam, referring to his daughter's experience with his hearing loss and tour, "She has seen me at my lowest, saw me turn it around, move forward and inspire hundreds of thousands of kids."

Sam Sandler's message, backed by his can-do attitude and family-friendly act, is uplifting and inspirational to all people who have experienced, are experiencing, or ever will experience adversity. In essence, his show is relevant to everyone, and that is DEAFinitely Magic.

For more information about Sam and his spectacular show, please visit www.deafinitelymagic.com or www.samsandler.com.