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Successful magician made his day job disappear

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Mark Yeager can pinpoint the day he became obsessed and passionate about becoming a magician.

July 11, 1973.

That's the day NorthPark Mall opened in Davenport, and Moline Police Officer Bob Logan was doing card tricks in a video arcade named Aladdin's Castle. Mr. Yeager was transfixed.

"I sat there for four hours just mesmerized by this guy," said Mr. Yeager, 61, of Moline. "We became friends, and he gave me my first lessons in magic. Then, about a month after that, he said 'Mark, we're basically done, because you can do my act.'"

"I was so passionate when I started, I would literally sit at a table with a mirror for hours and hours," practicing tricks, Mr. Yeager said. This "close-up magic" — mainly card tricks — formed the basis of his early career, as he devoured instructional books and cultivated mentors among accomplished magicians he is quick to credit.

For decades, Mr. Yeager has had a strong side-career as a magician and entertainer — comedy is a big part of his act — while also working a day job. He's performed at corporate events, conventions, kids' parties and as an opener for performers and motivational speakers such as Loretta Lynn, Suzy Bogguss and Mike Ditka.

A couple of years ago, he made his day job disappear. He left his post as a project manager at IBM in 2014. Now, without a net, performing magic is his only job, with bookings handled online at yeagermagic.com

"I'm a little over two years into just doing magic," he said. "It's challenging. I'll be the first to say that. But the rewards of entertaining — it's been just a crazy, incredible life, to be able to do what I want to do."

Audience participation is a staple of his show. The newest addition to his act involves visiting schools with a "motivational magic show for children."

"I want to take it to a level where I can take it to schools, perform at a reasonable price, talk about mentoring and continuous improvement, and do magic to help sell these principles," Mr. Yeager said. "I want to take children off the internet playing useless video games."

"It's starting to gain traction," he added. "First of all, school budgets are very challenged. What I get to do at a corporate job is a great deal more money than (performing for) kids."

"And people say, 'Well, Mark, why don't you just head to the corporate world?'" he said. "Well, no. Kids actually really need this, especially today."

The passion is still there, he said.

"I start to bounce off the walls when I start performing," Mr. Yeager said.

His fiancée, Jill Stowe, is his "magic tech" who makes his props. The "magic room" in his home is filled with



'I want to take it to a level where I can take it to schools... talk about mentoring and continuous improvement.'

MARK YEAGER

Photos: Meg McLaughlin / mmclaughlin@qconline.com
Mark Yeager, a magician, poses with a deck of cards at his home in Moline.

memorabilia, props, posters, a performing table and more.

The walls are lined with photos of his mentors, including some of the big names in the magic biz. He remembers them, honors them and loves to credit them. He became friends with Ed Marlo, Jay Marshall and Tony Slydini — go ahead and Google the names; these were masters.

"I've been very blessed to have learned from the very best," he said.

Some of them weren't an easy sell, even for someone as pleasant, earnest and openly friendly as Mr. Yeager. Magicians don't befriend newcomers or yield their secrets easily.



"They need to fall in love with you," Mr. Yeager said. "They're not quick to give these secrets away or even to hang out with you. They're a very elitist group."

Years ago, his daily work took him on the road, selling supplies to auto dealerships for Crosave Auto Supply. He worked his schedule so he could be in Chicago on Saturdays for Mr. Marlo's weekly roundtable — as soon as he could work himself in to that august group.

"These are the best of the best guys in the world at card magic," he said, pointing to a photo of himself and Mr. Marlo at a roundtable. "They didn't want people to come in. You had to prove you had some skills to get into this table and get into this group."

Mr. Marlo, who died in 1991, encouraged Mr. Yeager's sense of ethics.

"If I learned a trick and showed it to him, if I couldn't remember where I learned it from or the book I learned it from, he was furious," Mr. Yeager said. "He always insisted in giving people credit. Ethics to me are a huge deal."

An encounter with a prominent Japanese magician led to a tour of Japan for Mr. Yeager. From 1997 to 2000, he lived in Florida and performed at the Boca Raton Resort & Club.

He's found inspiration from many elements of his life. Working for IBM and absorbing the company's "continuous improvement mantra" helped spur him to keep honing the details of his presentation, he said. And his father — the late George Yeager, of Rock Island — was an art dealer and impresario of shows at Wharton Field House, giving him early exposures to show business. He credits his dad with a strong sense of aesthetics in creating posters.

There's no trick to his frequent use of the word "mentor." It works two ways.

"I talk about mentoring, and there are two aspects of mentoring — get a mentor and be a mentor," he said. "I'm a member of the local magic club. The people there, if they ask my advice on something, I try to help them out in any way I can."

Mark Yeager, a magician, performs a card trick.