

BUSINESS OBSERVER

PERSONAL FORTUNE

Financial consultant delights in beating odds, proving naysayers wrong

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Next Wednesday morning, there will be something a little different about the monthly breakfast meeting of the Montreal networking group Women's Entrepreneurial Exchange: A man will be in attendance. "I offered to get the operation," Michael Lifshitz told me last week.

That wasn't a requirement. A financial consultant with **Investors Group**, Lifshitz only has to talk about overcoming obstacles and facing challenges.

It's a topic that is of particular interest to the Women's Entrepreneurial Exchange, which offers women in business for themselves a chance to network, share resources and experiences, and support each other.

Facing challenges is also a topic Lifshitz is qualified to speak about. He was born with a rare genetic disorder called multiple congenital musculoskeletal abnormalities.

"It's so rare it's called a mutation," said the 34-year-old Lifshitz, who had a leg amputated when he was 18 months old. "I've only met one other person who has it, and I didn't meet that person until I was 17."

He has worn a prosthetic leg and has walked with a cane most of his life. In 2003, he got an electric wheel-

chair for longer distances. He did it reluctantly.

"I probably could have used the chair in the late 1990s, but I waited. This is a point I usually bring up when I'm speaking: If you don't ask for help, you're just making things a lot harder for yourself."

Still, he has never used his disability as an excuse or, more tellingly, let it prevent him from doing anything he has set his mind to.

"I'm in finance. I don't do my job with my feet.

"For the longest time, I've tried to do things that would prove to people what those of us with disabilities can do."

His disability has also informed his work as a financial consultant. Recently, he started providing a service to the parents of children with special needs, informing them about some of the less-well-known tax credits available to them.

"I could be the poster boy for the disability tax credit," he said.

Sarena Miller, an event organizer for the Women's Entrepreneurial Exchange, invited Lifshitz to speak because she believes it's his approach to his work and his life that is motivating all by itself.

"Michael lives in the moment. He puts things in perspective for the rest of us. He's also funny," she said.



PHOTO: COURTESY MICHAEL LIFSHITZ

Michael Lifshitz: "'I'm in finance. I don't do my job with my feet.'"

Lifshitz will focus on the first lesson all entrepreneurs, male and female, need to learn: how to ignore the doubters.

"I like to ask my audiences, 'How many people in this room have been told their business is not going to work?' Everyone usually puts up their hands."

He's talking from experience here. He has heard the same kind of thing all his life, more times than he can count.

"If I listened to all the people who have told me I can't do something, I probably would be home in bed now, on welfare, or in a residence."

That includes the first doctor he saw when he turned 18. As an adult, he could no longer be followed by his regular doctors at St. Justine's Children Hospital.

"This doctor was completely stunned when I told him I was attending CEGEP," Lifshitz recalled. "I walked out of his office and told my mother what happened. She said, 'You're not going back there, are you?' She was right: I didn't."

Lifshitz went on to get his MBA and become a chartered accountant, working for one of the city's big five accounting firms. He later started his own small accounting firm, sold it, and started working in the competitive field of financial planning.

In his spare time, Lifshitz, who admits to being afraid of heights, was part of a two-man team rappelling 110 metres down a Montreal skyscraper as part of a fundraising event for the Easter Seals Drop Zone Challenge. Perhaps even scarier, he started doing stand-up comedy a few years ago.

"I lost a bet, so I showed up for an open-mike night at the Comedy Nest," Lifshitz said.

He also put together a very personal routine, which began with what is

now his standard opening joke.

"I introduced myself, explained that I had multiple congenital musculoskeletal abnormalities, then added: 'Or as it's otherwise known, slightly effed up.' I cleaned that up for the newspaper," he said.

He was hooked, though that probably wasn't surprising. Lifshitz said he has always been a bit of "a clown trapped in an accountant's body." (You can watch Lifshitz performing his routines on his website www.sureican.info, where he has dubbed himself "crippingly funny.")

Lifshitz probably will include a few jokes in his speech for the Women's Entrepreneurial Exchange and, although motivational speaking is something he'd like to pursue, he confessed he doesn't think he's all that motivational.

Maybe that's because he's always taken the things he has accomplished for granted. Or maybe it's just how he lives his life and who he is that ends up inspiring others.

"Everyone faces challenges; mine just get me better parking."

Michael Lifshitz will talk about **Overcoming Obstacles** on Wednesday, May 12, at 7 a.m. at Les Pyramides D'or, 1375 Trans-Canada W., Suite 100. For information, call Sarena at 514 817-5555.