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Disabled comedian generates laughs and awareness

By DAVID LAZARUS, Staff Reporter

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MONTREAL — One of Michael Lifshitz's favourite lines is: "Everyone has challenges, but mine gets me a parking spot."

Or: "People ask me what I do. I tell them I'm a firefighter."

Or: "If I'm driving and stopped by a cop, I tell them: 'Just don't ask me to walk a straight line.'"

On their own, the jokes make no sense. But when they're delivered at a comedy club by 34-year-old Lifshitz, who is quite obviously physically disabled and needs to use a wheelchair when he can't use his cane, they not only make sense, they're hilarious.

One reviewer called him "cripplingly funny."

Since 2006, Lifshitz has been using his physical condition not only to engender laughs, but to kill stereotypes, as well as to make ordinary people more aware that being physically disabled doesn't mean being intellectually disabled – a notion that really riles him – and to motivate the oh-so-many people in this world who are trying to overcome life's oh-so-many challenges.

"I do comedy, I write, I do motivational speaking," Lifshitz said. "It's all to educate people, to let them know they can overcome their own challenges."

In Lifshitz's case, the challenges started at birth. His condition is known as multiple congenital musculoskeletal abnormalities, but in plain English, it means that Lifshitz has lived through nine surgeries, has an artificial leg, and copes day-to-day with a condition that's been debilitating to his body, but doesn't get in the way of him living his life.

He drives, has had girlfriends, and enjoys a flourishing career as a financial adviser, motivational speaker, volunteer and up-and-coming comic.

Lifshitz even has his own website – www.michaellifshitz.com.

"Look, I won't say there was no frustration growing up, but it minimized the amount of time I went to school," Lifshitz laughed, referring to the childhood surgeries he endured.

But Lifshitz never let his condition get the better of him. He went to United Talmud Torahs, had a bar mitzvah, went on to Bialik High School, became a chartered accountant, earned an MBA, and eventually joined Investors Group Financial Services, one of Canada's largest financial planning firms.

Lifshitz said that all through childhood and into adulthood, he used his natural sense of humour to disarm the occasional schoolmate who teased him or to deal with people who were obviously uncomfortable meeting him.

"I can always tell when someone is just uncomfortable or unsure of how to act, and who are the a--

holes,” he said.

Besides people who assume that somehow his disability means he also has an intellectual disability, the other thing that irks him is the assumption that he can't or doesn't work because of his condition.

“I especially like it when people talk slow to me, or louder, because they also think I am hard of hearing.” Lifshitz said.

“When I moved out on my own and bought my own furniture, the salesperson was completely shocked that I had a job.”

Indeed, at work, he counsels parents of children with special needs, giving them financial advice, and since 2006, he has spoken every year at Bialik High School as part of its sensitization program.

As for stand-up, Lifshitz has performed at comedy clubs in Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, including locally last month at a Young Guns of Comedy Event and at the downtown Comedynest. He knows one other disabled comic, Alan Shain of Ottawa, and they've performed on the same bill.

This fall, for the second straight year, Lifshitz will participate in the Drop Zone Challenge of the Quebec Society for Disabled Children, which involves rappelling down a tall building, and in October, he's planning a comedy fundraiser for the same organization.

Last February, Lifshitz performed in a Hearts for Dana comedy show to raise funds for a manual wheelchair for a disabled girl, and next year he plans to devote a whole comedy show in memory of the 20th anniversary of the death of his father.

All of which is not too shabby for someone who began his comedy career over a lost bet over dinner with friends.

Lifshitz's “vision” is to devote his life to his career, motivational speaking, comedy and to “talk more to kids” about his life as a way to “unleash their dreams.”

“I never really thought of myself as a motivational speaker, but that's what's happened,” he said.

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