

IN PROFILE
ALAN GREENBERG/MAGICIAN



Alan Greenberg considered a career in law when he enrolled in university. But, ultimately he decided to pursue his passion — magic. "You should never do this for the money," he says. "You should do it because it's fun and you love it."

He pulled his career out of his hat

STEPHANIE WHITTAKER
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

CAREER PATH

Telling you that Alan Greenberg's career has been magical would probably be a cheesy way to start this story. But it would also be accurate because there's something magical about a career that begins in early childhood.

Picture this: A 6-year-old boy is sick at home with the chicken pox. A friend of his mother visits with the gift of a magic set to keep the boy occupied during his confinement. During the same week, the little boy watches a movie on TV about magician Harry Houdini. It's the one that stars Tony Curtis. Although the story has been doctorated by Hollywood, the child finds it so compelling that it ignites his interest in magic. It would be another 19 years before he would stage the same stunt as Houdini, wriggling out of a strait jacket while hanging upside down from a construction crane.

But let's back up a bit. Two years after having the chicken pox, the same child is found every afternoon after school at Henry Gordon's Magic Store on Queen Mary Rd. while he waits for his mother to wrap up her workday as a bookkeeper in a nearby store.

"I would go to Henry Gordon's to see if there was anything I could afford to buy," said Greenberg, now a successful full-time magician.

He's telling his story in his own store, a 3,000-square-foot facility called Childplay in the Decarie Square shopping centre, where he and his staff host children's parties and Greenberg entertains the party-goers with magic.

Interest sparked at an early age: "I really got into the magic when I was 6," Greenberg said. "By then, I was borrowing books from the library that showed how to perform magic tricks, mostly card tricks. I'd try the tricks out on friends and family. I would also send away for tricks from the ads at the back of comic books. I'd put my dime in the

mail and get the magic trick."

First gigs: By the age of 10, Greenberg was being hired to do magic tricks at birthday parties.

"By then, I had trained myself to do 30 minutes of tricks. The parents hosting the parties would pick me up and drive me to McDonald's for the parties and I'd then be driven home," he said.

Throughout his adolescence, Greenberg increased his repertoire of magic and spent his summers in a series of jobs, as a camp counsellor, an elevator operator, shipping boxes in a factory, moving restaurant equipment, working as a short-order cook and dishwasher, cleaning windows and waxing cars.

Started university: He was considering a career in law when he enrolled in a bachelor of arts in political science at Concordia University.

"It was either going to be law or magic. A lot of my friends went into law," he said. "In fact, at my wedding, 11 of my parents were lawyers."

Worked abroad: After graduation, Greenberg travelled to Israel, where he worked on a kibbutz for six months.

"I loved it. I worked in the banana fields and in a plastic factory," he said. "After that, I visited Egypt, which is the most fascinating country in the world."

While in Egypt, he visited the tomb of Tutankhamen and discovered that his body fit exactly into the pharaoh's sarcophagus. It was while Greenberg was in Egypt that he decided he'd like to make a career of doing magic.

Got down to business: "When I got home, I decided I'd need to get some publicity," he said.

Organized publicity stunt: He decided to perform a Houdini stunt in public and organized it through McGill University's student union.

On Oct. 31, 1987, Greenberg, strapped into a strait jacket, was suspended by his feet from a crane above McTavish St. "Halloween was a good day for it," he said, adding he broke Houdini's record

of two minutes and 30 seconds.

"I had practiced it a lot," he said. "There was plenty of media coverage and Greenberg's magic career began to roll."

Provided instruction: "I was running programs in schools, teaching children to do magic," he said, adding he had started that work in 1982 while he was a CEGEP student.

"As it expanded, I hired university students and taught them to do magic so they could teach the children."

Throughout the 1990s, he built the program and had it translated for the French school sector.

Performed at various functions: He was also doing magic at birthday parties, corporate events and trade shows.

"If you have a booth at a trade show, having a magician will really draw the crowds in," he said.

When Greenberg was hired to do magic at children's birthday parties, he would often take his gig to play dromes that the parents had rented for the events.

"I realized that a lot of people were not throwing birthday parties in their homes," he said. "I also noticed that one by one, the play dromes were closing."

Created a party centre: Seeing a market, he decided to open his own play-drome five years ago. He bought a hockey rink and rollerblading floor from a bankrupt sports-drome and dubbed his facility at the Decarie Square shopping mall "Childplay." The venue hosts 300 birthday parties a year, including three a day on weekends.

He also runs a mail-order business, selling magic gadgets, like the ones in the comic books he used to read as a kid.

Greenberg, who employs 10 people and is an expert on the life and work of Harry Houdini, loves his career.

"You need good people skills and patience to be a magician," he said. "You should never do this for the money. You should do it because it's fun and you love it and it's honourable."

lan Greenberg said.

"Also, learn how to do your own publicity."

Good advice, but how do you top the great escape from a strait jacket while

hanging by the feet above McTavish St?

It might be easier to start with a dose of the chicken pox and a brand new magic set.

HIS ADVICE

Learn some magic tricks but be sure to "get an education to fall back on." Al

Santa helps suspend sick kids' disbelief

Thomas Schnurmacher



If the sick children at St. Justine's Hospital look out their windows on Monday night at about 6:15 p.m., they are going to see the world's most famous celebrity, Santa Claus, suspended above the grounds of Collège Brebeuf across the street.

Santa's spectacular arrival, complete with sled and three reindeer, is being arranged courtesy of Mystic Warrior Productions aka Montrealer Alan Greenberg, the 24-year-old who paid tribute to Harry Houdini on Halloween by re-enacting the legendary magician's strait-jacket escape while being suspended by his ankles from a crane.

Not only did Greenberg manage to re-enact the daredevil stunt, he even managed to trim five seconds off Houdini's record of two minutes, thirty seconds.

But back to Santa. As the kids "ooh" and "aah", Greenberg will beam the image of Santa into a large empty cage to be constructed on the Collège Brebeuf grounds, courtesy of Bench and Table.

The cage will be carefully gift-wrapped in glowing shades of red, gold and green. There will be a sudden flash of fire, a puff of smoke and voilà — the panels will crash to the floor to reveal something absolutely astonishing.

Although I certainly wouldn't want to give away the secret and ruin the surprise, I can tell you that a quick peek inside would reveal some of the contents of the age: cassette players and children's videos donated by Westmount Video, a surprise from the Town and Country Petting Zoo and presents from the children and staff of Hampstead School, the Côte St. Luc branch of Jewish People's School and the Solomon Schecter School.

Greenberg, who put together a Children Helping Children program when he received no help from corporate sponsors, says, "I was absolutely stunned at what happened when I went to those schools to ask the students to help out by donating a few toys."

"The response was overwhelming. I was expecting to receive only a few toys, but within a 24-hour period, I was virtually inundated with hundreds of toys that are filling up an entire garage."

A tip of the hat to Shulman Transport for providing transportation and equipment and certainly a hearty congratulations to Greenberg himself.

Originally planning to beam "Santa Claus" across the Montreal skyline, Greenberg was stymied in the effort by bureaucratic red tape and a lack of corporate sponsorship. Maybe next year.