



BY JIM KLEEFELD

Nestled in the underground of magic, spread across continents, buried in the gritty reality of day-to-day labors are some of magic's true hidden gems. Jeff Wawrzaszek — his last name has probably been mispronounced in more introductions than any other magician on the planet; it's pronounced "war-zak" — is one of those gems. He is part of magic's true support system, a steady worker who presents hundreds of shows each year at scout banquets, restaurants, birthday parties, and libraries in and around his hometown. He is one of those who provide fine local entertainment and become the first or only contact with professional magic for many people. Jeff not only entertains his audiences,

but he inspires them to learn magic themselves. He keeps them coming back to see him again and again, thanks to his series of info-tainment cards, which have also proven to be a gem of an idea.

Why do people choose to pay for a big name magic show in Las Vegas, for example, or in Pigeon Forge, where there are over 200 other attractions? Because of magicians like Wawrzaszek. Because they saw and interacted with a great performer who has made his life's work smaller and more local than those big name illusionists. Because they came in contact

Magician Jeff Wawrzaszek plying his trade at an auto show, in a restaurant, and at a library, his favorite type of venue.

with someone who impressed them with a combination of charm and a sense of wonder. Because a hidden gem of a magician made them believe in magic.

Like many other such gems, Wawrzaszek takes pride in being reliable and professional. He is able to consistently deliver a good show for large and small audiences in close-up, parlor, and stage venues. He has amassed over 14,000 shows in a full-time career that spans several decades, without missing a show. That bears repeating: he has never missed a show in 48 years. Today, he presents many of the effects he has been honing for dozens of years. He shows off his version of classics like the Linking Rings and the Newspaper Tear, and he adds new effects to specially themed shows each year, as well. This summer, he is offering libraries in his area a special science magic show with tricks that revolve around gravity and optical illusions. He is also offering two different magic workshops, one geared toward young children, and another for teens and tweens. He can provide many different programs because of his knowledge of magic and its history. Jeff is an avid reader, often collecting dozens of books on a single topic to further his research. He also keeps his material organized. When researching optical illusions for a current show, he photographed hundreds of images from various sources and filed them neatly in a notebook system.

As they do for most magicians, shows come one at a time from a wide variety of sources. Word-of-mouth referrals have continued to flow for many years. The old tenet that “shows beget shows” is true, but only if your shows are worth talking about. Many people who hire Jeff have seen his show or interacted with him personally and they like what they see. He is friendly, outgoing, personable, and well-groomed. He comes across like a neighbor or a friend, talented but approachable. Many of Jeff’s referrals come from his long tenure as a restaurant performer. He has built a strong and steady following at two family restaurants near his home in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He puts in a couple of hours at the restaurants each week, making time fly, and making kids and parents happy — not to mention the managers, who relish the draw of repeat business. His original giveaways and promotional material have earned him a place at the very top of this field.

For other venues, Jeff puts in the due diligence to find shows. Along with the trick-



based business cards that have driven many of his engagements, he creates his own modern and bright flyers, then hand-delivers them to top area scouting officials, who distribute them to local packs and troops. He contacts organizations in and around Ann Arbor whenever they sponsor a special event, and mails his professionally printed flyers to libraries to promote shows for Summer Reading Club events. Of course, his degree in Commercial Art and Design helps. This background gives him the skills needed to create flyers that look great and attract business. Having a flyer that stands out from the many “home publisher” creations of competitors makes a big difference. His slick, full-color, full-bleed pages instantly brand him as a professional.

Jeff is a naturally fast talker, averaging 220 words per minute, with gusts of up to 295. This limited his career choices to magician, used car salesman, or television voiceover actor reciting the side effects in drug commercials. Jeff chose magic, and he speaks about his life and work in appreciative tones. He’s proud to be a full-time magician, working “in the trenches,” as he puts it. He performs the many tasks of his multifaceted business earnestly and with integrity. Like many short-distance pros, he does his own promotion and publicity, makes solicitation phone calls, arranges his calendar, sends contracts, packs and travels with his show, performs, collects a fee, and pays his bills with the results. And he is continually pleased with both the

efforts and the results. He has no delusions about opening his own theater or receiving an obscene amount of money to jet over to Paris for a corporate gig. His parents instilled in him a strong work ethic, as well as an appreciation for favorable conditions. This hidden gem likes what he is doing and is happy to be doing what he likes.

Little stories, like little people, mean a lot to Jeff. At a birthday party for a five-year-old girl, he used a snake can disguised as a balloon pump. Failing to pump up the balloon, he opened the canister and let the snakes fly all over himself. As he did so, he saw a flash of pink. In the split second that the snakes had appeared, the birthday girl jumped up, ran past him and out the front door. Her fa-



A scene from Jeff's masked pantomime act; with rings in his 1973 drug education show; turning his diploma into a dove upon graduation in 1978; seated to the right of Richiardi [center] while on a diamond mine tour in South Africa.



ther followed, and everyone held their breath until the pair returned to the party, cautious, but not frightened. Jeff had the girl laughing and clapping within minutes, and got several referral bookings from visiting parents who were impressed at how well he handled the situation. Moments like this are what keep him on course.

It was not always easy for Wawrzaszek. Right after he procured his college design degree, he bought a motor home and toured the Midwest, doing hundreds of school assemblies a year. (Actually, immediately after accepting his diploma from Eastern Michigan University, Jeff turned the document into a dove, and a photo of this moment received national newspaper coverage.) He lived in his tiny RV and drove through the Midwest, stopping in each new town, day after day.

Even before he auditioned for School Assembly Services out of Chicago and landed the job, Jeff had already established himself as a hard worker and an accomplished entertainer. In 1971, at the age of fifteen, Jeff won first place in competitions at both the SAM and IBM national conventions. Several years of study and practice with a thimble manipulation act also netted him a First Place trophy at the 1971 Columbus Magi-Fest, where he beat out the charismatic Clevelander Arsenio Hall. He later took the coveted Jack Gwynne Award at an Abbott's Get-Together. That was a particular goal of

Jeff's, having been an Abbott's attendee for many years and a protégé of Karrell Fox. Jeff took time off work and spent an entire summer practicing and preparing for the August event. A few years later, another win at an SAM convention brought his talents to the attention of a producer who was looking for a touring act. Jeff's act was a solid twelve minutes, with presentations of the Linking Rings, thimble manipulation, some original ring-and-silk material, and a very theatrical pantomime version of Gene Anderson's Torn & Restored Newspaper. Jeff signed on with the producer and soon found himself in South Africa, opening for Richiardi. This proved to be a huge benefit, because he not only got to hone his act, night after night, but he also learned a great deal by watching and listening to the master showman.

His touring and awards all came about because Jeff had saved seventeen Chex cereal box tops so he could send away for the Scarecrow Magic Set premium offered by Ralston Purina. He couldn't afford the company's offer to get the tricks sooner by sending fifty cents along with just two box tops. The small, square kit contained some easy, practical tricks with paper and plastic props, but it proved enticing for the youth. Even at age ten, Jeff was enthralled by magic. He was performing paid shows before he could drive, and his father chauffeured him to gigs. His parents helped pay his way through

college, but they never once advised him to "get a real job." In fact, his father helped him develop a script for one of the nation's first ever anti-drug magic shows, which Jeff presented at schools all over the Midwest, starting when he was sixteen years old. Jeff spent his senior year of high school traveling to perform at 400 other schools. By the end of the summer after his Junior year, he had completed enough credits to graduate, so instead of attending school, he bought a small RV, signed with an agency, and took his drug education show on the road. He credits good advice from veteran school-show performer Dick Oslund for keeping his sanity while presenting two to three shows per day, every day, for eight months. He graduated with the rest of his class when he returned home in June 1974.

That was not his only extensive road trip. Besides the 1978 motor home tour of the Midwest, Jeff did a six-month national tour in 1984 to introduce the Voyager, Chrysler's first minivan. That was a busy year for Jeff. In addition to touring for Chrysler, he began doing auto shows all over the US for General Motors, and he managed to find time to get married!

When asked why he carries so many extra letters in his surname, Wawrzaszek says that he proudly bears them in tribute to his father — his mentor, guide, advisor, and friend. He knows the name is long, unusual,

MAGIC SHOW MIND READER

Here is an example of one of Jeff Wawrzaszek's creative designs. To perform the trick, the magician asks the spectator to mentally choose any one of the seven magic-related words around the circle. The performer pokes a pencil in and out of various holes while the spectator mentally spells the magic word in his thoughts. When the spectator has come to the end of his spelling, he stops the magician and discovers that the magician's pencil is in the hole at the very word he chose. The bright colors are eye-catching, and the original art is fresh as well as informative. The four-by-six-inch card can be printed as a double-sided standard postcard by almost any printing company. Jeff has these printed by the thousands and then uses a regular hole-punch to make the seven holes needed. The original art has marks printed around the purple ring so that centering each hole is easy. The instructions for performing the trick are included across the top of the front, and can later be trimmed off by a spectator who takes home the giveaway card. On the back of the card, in that same tear-off place, are directions revealing the secret of how to make



the trick work. The design incorporates some standard magic symbols, such as a rabbit and playing cards, but also includes a caricature of Jeff and his phone number. Any spectator who carries this trick with him to show others will be sharing not only his own magical prowess, but also Jeff's face and contact information, so the card is positioned to continue generating increased interest in Jeff and his magic.

and difficult to spell. But instead of complaining or changing it, he used his creative skills to turn it into an advantage. His business card appears to be the standard size, with his last name truncated. Then, as a surprise, it unfolds, opening like a pop-up book to reveal the full spelling in large, bold letters.

That artistic and witty business card design is no accident. Jeff has successfully exploited his design degree, a natural talent for art, and an intense work ethic in the grand project of creating clever, memorable, and innovative product giveaways. He calls this collection of mini-tricks “Abra-Card-Abra.” Some are based on age-old puzzles and common children’s tricks, but Jeff has carefully rethought, revamped, and redesigned each one.

The Abra-Card-Abra giveaways have brought him a great deal of success. While working at a restaurant, he noticed that many families returned weekly or biweekly. These patrons wanted to see something new at every visit. At first, Jeff simply brought some different close-up effects each week. Then he

hit upon the idea that he could show some magic, teach the guests some magic, and leave them with a memorable souvenir. He began creating his own small, printable tricks that he could leave with the guests. Besides making those customers fans of Jeff Wawrzaszek, he was making them fans of magic.

After spending a considerable amount of time in research, his first giveaway was based on an interlinking loops effect. Jeff bought thousands of nylon loops, bagged them in pairs, and added a beautifully designed two-sided business card. The card had his contact information on the front, and clearly illustrated instructions for the loop trick on the back. When he arrived at a restaurant table, he gave one package to each person there, performed the loop trick, then gave personal attention to each person so they could learn to perform the trick. Just as the food was arriving, he was quietly making his exit, leaving everyone with knowledge of a simple magic trick and the props to perform it.

Another packet includes a small wooden bead, a rubber cord, and a card explaining

how to magically make the bead travel upward along the cord. Yet another trick shows three cards with arrows, two pointing up, one pointing down. The magician flips over three cards, and all of the arrows point up — Jeff’s take on an old trick with three cups. Try as he might, the spectator cannot emulate the magician’s success, until he reads the simple directions on the back, and then he can take the cards home to perform for his friends. Jeff’s design background really kicked in here when he found a way to label the cards with the words “up” and “down” which read correctly even when the card is turned end for end. As an added bonus, he has also incorporated a nifty extra trick that allows the magician to tell exactly which one of the arrow cards a spectator turns over.

Perhaps one of the simplest and most clever innovations he has produced for these giveaways is his Confusing Colors card, a version of the Stroop Effect. A business card is handed out, showing a variety of color words printed in different colors. Each word is printed in a different color from the one the word itself names — the word “red” is printed in green, the word “yellow” is printed in red, and so forth. After watching his spectators struggle to say the colors of the ink rather than read the words, he proceeds to perform this brain-confusing task not only correctly, but with lightning speed. The kicker comes when he turns over the card for the spectator and shows instructions that teach how he or she, too, can accomplish this seeming miracle. Jeff finds great joy in watching a seven-year-old immediately amaze his mother with apparently extraordinary skill. The kids keep the cards and can present the effect to their friends.

These cards and the small props that go with them constitute a beginning course in magic. Jeff gives them away freely to every table during his evening restaurant stint. Children love learning the magic, the parents love that their kids are learning, and the manager loves that the families return because of the giveaways. Jeff says that many families come back week after week, for the purpose of collecting and learning all of his clever trick giveaways. He was recently let go from the restaurant when a new manager arrived, determined to save the owner money. After one interview and a short “audition” of using the giveaways at the tables, the manager immediately offered him his job back, easily able to



Promoting the 1984 Plymouth Voyager. A recent photo of Jeff teaching a young restaurant patron. [Facing page] Some of the Abra-Card-Abra cards.

see the moneymaking potential of having Jeff around to encourage return customers.

The promotional giveaway materials were working so well that Jeff's good friend Gene Anderson invited Jeff to share his ideas at a dinner with several other well-known magicians. After seeing Jeff's novel designs and creations, Mac King said simply, "You've inspired me." That comment in turn inspired Jeff to market his materials to other magicians. He set about producing more trick designs and then wrote a 100-page book on using the materials to increase business. It took him 807.25 hours to finish the project. That exact number is a product of Jeff's organized method of working. As part of the project, he developed and followed a six-step plan, kept track of what he put into it, sequenced the work components, and tallied the time spent writing and creating the materials. (Being mathematically inclined, Jeff figures he has used 400,000 linear feet of rope in his performances over the years, and recently realized that if he could really restore a cut rope, he would have saved 399,992 feet of rope.)

Wawrzaszek worked hard to create quality giveaways. He wanted clean art, high-quality images, easy-to-master and easy-to-teach tricks that could be performed by young children, produced cheaply, and packaged simply. Some of the effects consist of a single specially printed business card; others include a card and a small prop, usually a cheap and easily obtainable item. Jeff has found that the Abra-Card-Abra materials work well in a variety of situations. He uses them to up-sell his birthday business by providing the tricks as a show add-on, or by selling them in goodie bags. He also brings the tricks to hand out and use as instructional materials when he teaches magic workshops. He says the attendees and the clients are both impressed that the children in the workshop take home professionally produced props, not just household staples like string and rubber bands. The tricks excite adults as well as children, because almost all of them include a clever twist on a familiar theme.

In addition to his restaurant gigs, Jeff continues to present general magic shows at family affairs, birthday parties, and libraries. For many years, he focused heavily on school assembly programs during weekdays. The recent recession, however, dried up much of the available education money, and schools

became reluctant to pay for anything outside of their immediate primary needs. With fewer schools calling for shows, Jeff simply switched gears and focused more heavily on

possible that only the birthday child and Mom were eager to see a magician. At a library, everybody who comes wants to be there. These events have become summer staples for Jeff, who still books about seventy such shows each year. One regional library has booked him every year for over forty years.

At one library, Jeff presented one of his staple routines and subsequently provoked a very cute and memorable moment. In the routine, he creates a mouse balloon sculpture. He proudly displays the balloon animal and claims that, miraculously, it can play the piano. At that moment, a small baby grand piano lid rises up from a box on his table. He places the balloon mouse — and candelabra, of course — inside the box and commands, "Hit it, Mice-tro!" Piano music emanates through his sound system. At one particular show, there was a silent pause of appreciation from the audience, then a young girl in the front row loudly proclaimed, "That balloon mouse isn't playing the piano. He's got a *real* mouse in there!"

The smaller and more personal audiences like that one make Jeff realize he is comfortable being home almost daily, generally within a 100-mile radius for all of his shows. Life is easier now than it was when he was on the road.

The Wawrzaszeks — Jeff, his wife Sue, and son Ryan — live in an Ann Arbor home that Jeff bought in 1980. The house was initially small, but Jeff soon designed and built a considerable addition. They are comfortable with their lives and community. Sue is a legal secretary, and she meshes her regular full-time schedule with Jeff's performing schedule. They share housework and responsibilities, each picking up some slack when schedules are pressing for the other.

Working from home, performing within driving distance, and spending time with the family feel like fine upstanding values to magicians like Jeff who work the "trenches" of this profession. It is exactly for these reasons that he has remained a "hidden gem" of a magician. **M**

Jim Kleefeld is top children's performer, specializing in school assemblies and themed library shows. He has written nineteen magic books and has published over 1,000 articles, writing for almost every major magic magazine.



private parties and organization events.

Libraries are his favorite organization for presentations, because of the nature of the self-selecting audience. At a birthday party, there might be twenty kids, but it is