

Comedian changes his tune

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Twenty years ago, says a friend of comedian Jeff Allen, they were just building good testimonials.

Back then, Allen was a boozier and a druggie, sleeping on floors and swiping a neighbor's soft drink bottles for money. He was working the grueling comedy club circuit, traveling 46 weeks a year and telling jokes about drinking and getting stoned.

These days, Allen tells jokes about his wife, his life and his cars.

"It's very Cosby-esque," the 44-year old comedian said.

Everything changed for Allen about four years ago, when the longtime atheist found peace through religion.

"I always make a distinction between finding religion and walking with Christ. Christ literally captured my heart. I don't know how else to explain it. It's a personal relationship with God." He said.

Allen is back on the comedy circuit, but now he is working as a Christian comedian performing the same squeaky-clean act in Las Vegas that he does in churches, including Grove Avenue Baptist Church tonight at 7. The difference is that if he is asked at a church, he will end the show with a personal testimonial about the changes God has made in his life. "This may sound "clichéd, but I am at peace.

I'm just really, really enjoying the process."

In his drinking days, Allen said he was mostly just angry and bitter, which affected his act. He had problems with the IRS. When he tried out social commentary, he almost found himself involved in fistfights. After one show, a woman confronted him and told him that he was evil from the top of his head to the tip of his toes.

The worst point of his life came when his marriage began to deteriorate. With his career on the wane, Allen and his wife Tami decided to get a divorce. They were 10 miles from the courthouse to make it official when they decided to try again. Two years later, he found God.

Looking back on it, hitting bottom was not so bad. "It's a long way from being doused with kerosene, being nailed to a cross and being set on fire as a light for Pontius Pilate's birthday party," he said.

Last week, the Chicago native was in Los Angeles – "the land of soot and sin," he called it – to pitch his idea of a sitcom to networks. Some had already turned him down, with NBC being the most polite about it, but he still had hopes for Fox Family Network and PAX TV. His idea is for an old-fashioned family sitcom.

"We're not inventing the wheel. I think they've gotten away from any real semblance of a family on television. I think we'll do a wife, kids, and stay away from any sexual innuendo," he said.

In the show, tentatively titled "Happy Wife, Happy Life," Allen would play a golf professional who did not make it on the tour and had to come home to his family. It is a simple enough

situation, similar to the family sitcoms made popular by Bill Cosby in the '80s and Tim Allen in the '90s, but he said the network executives are balking.

"What makes it work is the reality of it. They just don't get it. 'Can one of the kids be an alien?'"

On the show, he would have three children, although in real life he only has two. He added the third child for the show because good comedy writing goes in threes, he said, and he did not want to actually have to raise a third one.

"A good friend came over and said, 'You lie?' I said, 'Yeah. I call it creative license.'"

But taking creative license can run Allen into problems with the more literal-minded listeners he finds at some churches. They hear the jokes he tells about his wife, all made with humorous intent, and are appalled. He is frequently asked whether his wife knows what he says about her.

"No, I tell my wife I'm a bricklayer," he said sarcastically. He met Tami when she was a waitress at a comedy club in Ohio, and followed him into religion a year and a half after his epiphany.

Allen does not talk specifically about Christianity in his act because he was not raised in the church and does not know whose toes he might step on. He does not know all the fine distinctions between the denominations, and does not talk about the Bible because "I haven't found anything in the Bible yet worth mocking."

His act is like any comedy act now, only clean. The bitterness and anger are gone. The problems with the IRS are still there, but at least he's happier about it.