

By JESSICA ALLEN

Date published: 5/1/2004

Jeff Allen was more than a class clown in school—he was down-right obnoxious.

“I was always in trouble,” recalled the 47-year-old professional comedian during a phone interview this week. “I don’t think the teachers who taught me would be surprised if they learned what I do now.”

But most who knew him then wouldn’t recognize Allen if they saw him perform now.

He is no longer the angry alcoholic who would joke about his wife on stage to the point that she would leave the room in tears.

Instead, the Nashville resident is more thoughtful and spiritual. He became a born-again Christian seven years ago—and his acts focus more on family scenarios.

His favorite subject these days is raising teenagers: “Nowhere in the Bible does it mention how old the Devil was when he rejected God’s authority. My guess would be about 15.”

Allen’s venues also have changed. He now gets laughs at churches—where he also gives testimony about the difference God has made in his life.

“I never really had a dirty act. But I was an angry guy and having a relationship with Christ is all about peace,” said Allen, who will perform at 7:30 p.m. Friday at Mount Ararat Baptist Church in Stafford County.

Juan Rivera, pastor of adult ministries at Mount Ararat, said Allen’s clean act was the first thing he noticed when he reviewed the comedian’s tape.

“Most humor today is peppered with bad language and sexual innuendos,” Rivera said. “We wanted something that our families could attend.”

Although Allen loved to make people laugh, he said he didn’t exactly know how to get into the business when he started in 1978 in Chicago.

At the time, a 22-year-old Allen was tagging along with his brother Kirk’s band. He heard about the Comedy Cottage, a place where comedians open up for bands.

Allen, who suffered from stage fright, said he hung out at the place for three months before he got the courage on Thanksgiving Day to go on stage.

“Technically, I got drunk enough to go up,” he said. “They hated me. I didn’t know who was getting punished more, me or them.”

Allen decided to go back the following Sunday, when the manager

asked him to go on stage again. This time he needed to make sense, the manager told him.

Allen performed that night and never stopped.

He started working at clubs, colleges and casinos around the country during the 1980s.

But Allen said his acts were filled with anger, which earned him the nickname “Mr. Psycho.” He now describes his trashy jokes as “puke” and said he had become an alcoholic.

“I looked out and realized the audience wasn’t getting older, I was,” Allen said. “So I talked more about drinking because they were drinking, I was drinking.”

Allen quit drinking in 1987, attended Alcoholic Anonymous and read dozens of self-help books and philosophy searching for meaning in his life, he said.

But he continued to be depressed, he said.

He was traveling over 200 days a year, spending less time with his wife, Tami, and their two sons.

The marriage suffered to the point that he and his wife filed for divorce in 1995. They were 10 minutes away from the courthouse, papers in hand, when Tami decided to give it another chance, he said.

Allen, who didn’t believe in God at the time, accepted the Lord two years later.

“I was looking for an answer to why we are here,” he said. “It all led to Christ. I looked for 10 years until I couldn’t deny that he was the answer.”

Allen, whose oldest son is in the Army and youngest in high school, said his jokes still focus on family, but it’s more like “Bill Cosby’s comedy.”

He headlines his own national comedy tour, Jeff Allen and Friends: Funny People of Faith.

Allen received the 2002 Grady Nutt Humor Award, the most prestigious comedy award in the Christian market. He has also been featured in comedy specials on Showtime, HBO, VH1, Comedy Central and the Grand Ole Opry. Allen has also starred in his own one-hour cable-TV comedy special, “Happy Wife, Happy Life” for PAX.

He stopped doing night clubs and worked out a way to visit churches free of charge.

“Christ told his disciples to make disciples of all men,” Allen said. “I feel it’s my calling to meet others who are in their 40s who might be financially successful, but feel empty.”

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