

Laughter in the Dark

Christian funnyman Michael Jr. has performed on The Tonight Show With Jay Leno, Jimmy Kimmel Live! and the Comedy Central network. But instead of settling for smiles from TV audiences, he took his jokes to unlikely venues—prisons, homeless shelters and safehouses for the abused and HIV patients. Charisma spoke with him about his comedy tour to these depressing places that's chronicled in his upcoming film, Comedy: The Road Less Traveled, set to release in September.

Charisma: *Why did you decide to leave the normal setting for a comedy show and take your routine to people in desperate situations?*

Michael Jr.: About a year and a half ago I was headlining in a club in Los Angeles in a well-to-do area. Most of the time when a comedian gets on stage he wants to get laughter. That night God said, "Don't go out there to get laughter from people, go out there and give them an opportunity to laugh." [That statement] changed everything I did. After the show I walked outside and there were a lot of people around me wanting my autograph and smiling. I looked across the street and saw a homeless guy with the exact opposite look on his face than those around me. After I saw this guy, I asked myself, *How can I take comedy to him? What would that look like?* Then we decided do this film called *Comedy: The Road Less Traveled*, and we went on a tour.

Charisma: *You visited the Samaritan House in Fort Worth, Texas, which houses homeless people with HIV; The Dolphin House in Montrose, Colo., which cares for children abused by their drug-addicted parents; and youth and adult prisons. How did you incorporate their very serious, sad circumstances into your comedy shows?*

Michael Jr.: I have no idea how it happened. In every location I went to, it was pretty phenomenal ... but to be real with you, I was a little afraid. I would think: *Everyone in this room has HIV, they're homeless or they have some sort of other issue. And now I'm going to tell jokes. How will I be received?*

In an adult prison, I'm sitting there praying: "[God], I need a joke right up front, so I can be funny-immediately." I was going to say, "You guys are a captive audience!" But because I was afraid, I didn't do that one. But there was an old white guy right up front [in the audience] named Moses. He had a white beard, so I looked at him and said, "Moses, when I read about you in the Bible you were doing better than this. What happened?"

I said, "Moses, this is what I want you to do: I want you to look the prison guard directly in his eyes. I want you to say, 'Let my people go.'" The whole room burst out laughing, and we had a fabulous time from that point on. In most locations there was something there that really allowed me to connect [with my audience].

In this film you actually get to see these transformations. In the Samaritan House a guy approached me and said, "I want you to know I haven't laughed like this in over 20 years, since I was diagnosed with AIDS." It was at that moment that I knew this thing was bigger than just going and telling jokes to people.

Charisma: *That's exciting. What kind of reaction have you seen so far from people watching the film?*

Michael Jr.: We've done a few small screenings. After people see this film they want to do something. A lady in Orlando saw the film and [told me], "On Wednesdays, I'm opening up my [dance] studio to teach homeless kids how to dance ballet." It just blew me away. She comes up with this because of seeing

this film. There are other people doing the same kind of stuff.

Charisma: *Though you're a Christian comedian, you've performed in both religious and secular venues. How has your faith affected your craft?*

Michael Jr.: I have an understanding that my comedy and the things that I do are way bigger than me. It's just a gift that I have, and it's only really a gift if I am willing to give it away—not just to those who can afford it, but more importantly to those who really need it.

The Bible says in Proverbs 17:22: “A merry heart does good like medicine” If it's a medicine and it does good for you, shouldn't we give medicine to those who really need it—to those who are sick? It just makes sense to me.

Your Turn

How can you use your gifts for good? It's not as hard as you may think. Here are a few easy ideas.

1. If you are a seamstress, why not use your abilities to provide clothes for the less fortunate? You could even offer to teach classes at women's shelters in your area.
2. Can you read? Why not volunteer at an orphanage or nursing home. Taking time to read to someone could mean the world to a person who feels abandoned.
3. If you're a great business person, look into teaching interview skills at a homeless shelter. Some people just need a little direction to get back on their feet.