

Amputee Comedian Leads 'High-Flying' Life

(SOUTH BOSTON, MA) Tom Hayes lost his left leg, at the hip, to cancer at age 13, but he didn't lose his sense of humor. Forty-three years later, the former sales executive and part-time comedian, who was selected as Boston's Funniest Person in 1986, has turned his comedy routines and life experience into a successful motivational speaking career and upcoming book.

As a young teen, Hayes underwent hip diarticulation following a diagnosis of osteosarcoma, which had a survival rate of only five percent. The main message of his motivational talks comes from this experience: just enjoy life because it is an incredible gift.

Hayes has used his gift well. For many years he was a sales executive for Fuji by day and a popular comedian and magician by night. Sometimes the lines between his jobs blurred. He occasionally used a disappearing money trick to show prospects how their money would disappear if they bought from one of his competitors.

For the past 20 years he has performed weekend shows at New England comedy clubs, including Nick's and the Comedy Connection in Boston. He has opened for Phyllis Diller, with whom he enjoyed a pivotal conversation, as well as for Henny Youngman, the Four Tops and Four Seasons. The year he was named Boston's Funniest Person, Ellen DeGeneres was named the contest's national winner.

Three years ago he gave up his day job to pursue comedy and motivational speaking full time. "I felt like an evangelist," he says about the first time he spoke to a crowd and they responded to his motivational message, which is high on comedy. He now speaks to a number of Fortune 500 companies and other organizations each year.

Hayes has never been one to sit back and let life happen to him. He enjoys, in his words, "crazy adventures." He has traveled to New Zealand and Australia to go fly fishing, black water cave rafting and bungee jumping. He calls bungee jumping at the Pipeline, New Zealand's highest jump at 340 feet, "the most spiritual thing I've ever done...the feeling of flight was incredible," especially since he was in a harness, not dangling by his feet as with most jumpers. He likens the experience to jumping off Boston's Prudential Center. "It was the worst fear I've ever confronted," he says, "almost as bad as being on stage and nobody's laughing."

Hayes has wanted to fly since he was a kid, when he wanted to be like Superman. After he lost his leg, he discovered he could "fly" on his bike with just one leg. The bike erased his disabilities and made him feel equal again.

He has also learned to "fly" on skis. While participating in New England Handicapped Skier Association events, he met Matt Albuquerque of Next Step Orthotics and Prosthetics in Manchester, N.H., who is now one of his prosthetists. He credits Albuquerque with telling him, "Amputees need to learn they can fly. We all have different ways to fly."

Now, Hayes is working on a book, tentatively titled, "How I Learned to Fly." He says he is writing his life story like a screenplay, sort of a Forrest Gump look at key events in his life that have allowed him to take flight. And he envisions the final scene being like that of the movie "ET," with him flying through the sky on his bike.