

PHOTO: MARK PASKELL

By MARK PASKELL

As I drove across the hot, dusty desert, making my way from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, one thought was on my mind: what new magical and medical wonders would be appearing before my eyes this weekend? I was headed to the MGM Grand Hotel to participate in the 25th anniversary celebration of Project Magic, David Copperfield's stroke-of-genius idea to help hospital patients recover coordination and cognitive skills by teaching magic tricks specially chosen with professional occupational therapists. I've always been very proud to be one of the founding directors of this program, and over time it has grown beyond all expectations. It's been a great journey, but what is the state of the union, 25 long years later?

First, a brief trip back through time: It's 1982, and David Copperfield is astounding the world with his live shows and television specials.

But now it's his turn to be astounded — a fan who had been corresponding with him about his own beginning magic career finally sends David a picture of himself... and he's in a wheelchair. David had a certain visual in his mind of the young man, but because the boy always referred to himself as a "magi-

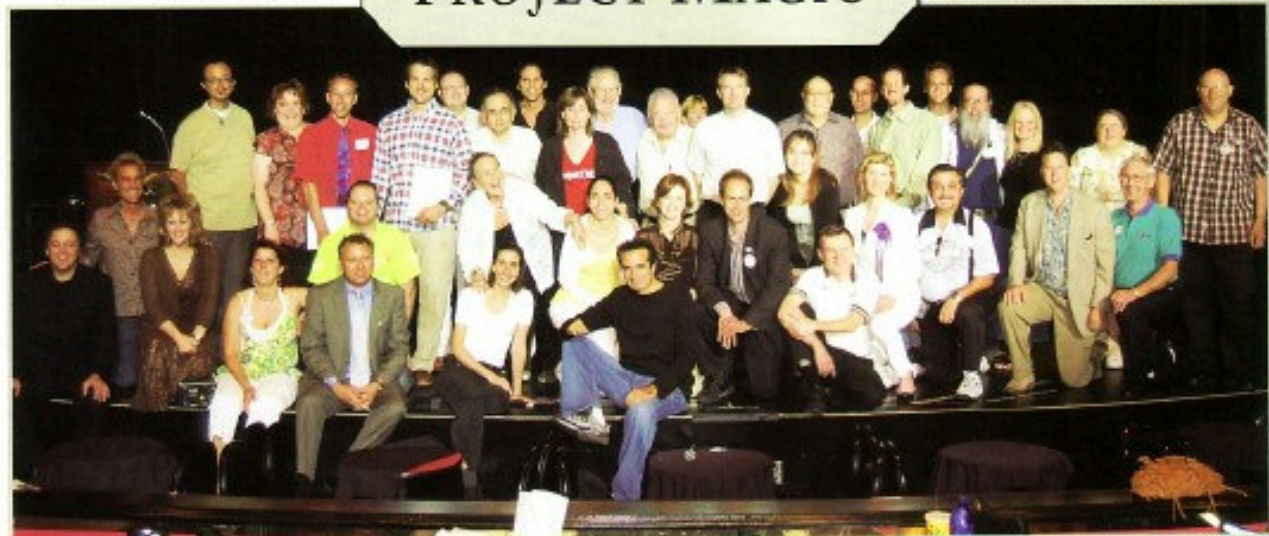
cian" and not "handicapped," the illusionist never saw him that way. It got Copperfield thinking on how the public perceives disabled people and how they perceive themselves. It was from this simple beginning that Project Magic was born. Instead of teaching repetitive, sometimes boring exercises to patients recovering from debilitating injuries, therapists, working with magicians, would teach them magic tricks.

Besides helping in healing, it was a great shot of self-esteem when a patient could fool one of his "normal" visitors with his newfound skill.

After an extensive search, David found the medical support he needed at Daniel Freeman Hospital in Inglewood, California. Julie Dejean, then the assistant director of the occupational therapy department, got on board and began introducing the concept to the medical community. Meanwhile, David premiered the

THE MIRACLE CONTINUES

25 YEARS OF PROJECT MAGIC



PHOTOS: BRIGITTE RICHER-SAMAGAN

David Copperfield teaches a trick from the Project Magic curriculum. Kristle De Roovere presents a patient-signed photo to David and Julie Dejean. Contents of The Sterile Box. Project Magic participants from around the world gathered in Las Vegas, June 28-30, 2007.

idea at the 1982 Las Vegas Desert Seminar at the Frontier Hotel. He also spoke at the Hollywood IBM Ring meeting and asked for volunteers. From my seat in the room that night I knew I was hearing something totally unique, so I signed on, along with several others. The next few months consisted of a lot of work, from choosing magic that would be suitable for therapy, to staging benefits to raise money and awareness, to just getting out to various hospitals and doing the program. Our first big success was when Julie and David made an official presentation at the American Occupational Therapy Association, which resulted in the AOTA officially endorsing the project. It was a magnificent beginning.

We appeared on news programs and talk shows, showing our unique combo of healing therapy and magic. We were recognized by the City of Los Angeles with a proclamation, and we staged a star-studded benefit at The Magic Castle. Our numbers were growing, both magicians and hospitals nationwide were joining up and supporting the new program. In the following years, David made many appearances worldwide to help initiate the program overseas, and today we can proudly say that Project Magic has a presence in over thirty countries.

Back to the present: Thursday night featured a cocktail party at the MGM's West Wing Bar, hosted by David. It was a great way to start, with people getting to meet the man himself and also meet each other. If someone listened in, they probably would have wondered at all the different languages and accents in one room. Chris Kenner, David's right-hand man, was also there to make sure things were running smoothly. This is a role he would repeat all weekend — in fact, he had been instrumental in helping set up the entire conference. Medical and magical chatter flew back and forth, and even some close-up was performed by yours truly.

Friday morning started bright and early at 9 a.m. with welcoming remarks. The conference was taking place in the Hollywood Theatre, the very location where David performed his nightly show. Californian Ron Porter, magician, psychologist, and one of the founding directors of Project Magic, gave a brief talk on the relationship of magic and therapy throughout history, and brought everyone up to speed on the current status. Then our first presenters really started things off with a bang — they showed how they had brought magic to the world of the blind! Walther and Brigitte

Richter had been implementing the program in their native country of Austria for many years. But they astounded the audience with their next venture. Traveling to Vienna's oldest school for the blind, the Richters started a program showing how they could teach magic to the visually impaired. Walther shot a film showing exactly how they did this, and you could see everyone in the MGM lean forward in astonishment. Here were these blind kids doing tricks and having a wondrous, healing experience — and fooling people! Walther and Brigitte are perfect examples of someone taking the concepts of Project Magic and expanding them to the next level.

But this was just the beginning. Belgium's Ivo Van Camp showed how limitations and restrictions can be the inspiration for creative genius. Ivo works in pediatric cancer wards, where the requirements are very strict regarding the children's treatment. Bringing in regular props was an impossibility, so — voila! — he created The Sterile Box, a magic kit full of tricks that could be sterilized before brought into the ward. It was amazing and inspiring to see how this man added a little science to help the magic flourish.

It didn't stop there. The next two days were a cornucopia of new ideas and passionate, devoted people. Among the highlights:

Jeff McBride blew the room away with his amazing talent and perceptive insights into how the worlds of magic and medicine are inextricably linked — the shaman and the showman. Along with his Magic & Mystery School that he runs in Las Vegas, Jeff also holds forth with Magic For Medical Professionals, a conference specifically designed for physicians that underlines how bonding with patients and the healing process itself can be greatly improved by developing performance and communication skills. Jeff performed some miracles to illustrate his points, and the audience ate it up; they did not want him to leave the stage. I won't forget a quote he shared from the Tibetans: "Anything that relieves suffering is medicine."

Scott Tokas, a successful trade show magician from California, saw a need for doctors and clinicians to reduce anxiety and "break the ice" with patients undergoing various treatments. Thus he created, along with Harrison J. Carroll, Side-Fx, a whole program of tricks that docs can do with equipment already in the waiting room. When he talked about and demonstrated such gems as Cut-and-Restored Stethoscope, Dime Through Rubber Glove, Leaping Band-Aid, and Cotton (instead of sponge) Balls, one instantly saw the fantastic possibilities. Scott generously handed out copies of his Side-Fx DVD, which detailed all the routines.

As a couple, Texans Cody and Debbie Fisher were made for this program — he is a

pro conjuror, she is an occupational therapist with a specialization in hand therapy. They outlined many powerful techniques to adapt magic therapy to outpatient clinical and academic settings.

Ruth Joselevitz is the powerhouse coordinator from Mexico. She has built up a huge following for the program in her country in the past thirteen years, and she and the professionals who spoke showed that magic really is an international language.

Belgium's Kristel De Roovere has been working with Project Magic since 1996, with a lot of her work focusing on disabled children. As an osteopath and physiotherapist, she is always pushing the envelope of scientific research in her field, and she shared many of her cutting-edge findings with the audience.

Kevin and Cindy Spencer had a great presentation with their "The Healing of Magic" program, which started in 1984 and was itself inspired by Project Magic. They have had fantastic results and have influenced research projects in Rome and Hong Kong.

Each day ended with David taking the stage. He gave a mini-workshop, showed the new Project Magic video, and answered audience questions. You could really see how pleased he was that his idea was being shared throughout the world with such innovative results. Julie Dejean joined him onstage, and it was obvious that 25 years of working together had resulted in a rock-solid team. Julie runs the headquarters of Project Magic out of Kansas, along with working full-time as administrative director at Stormont-Vail West Psychiatric Hospital.

There were many more presentations, but too soon we were at the end. Afterwards, as a special treat, Chris Kenner took everyone to David's "secret warehouse" and gave them the deluxe tour. When people were saying goodbye, you could feel the emotion of the shared passions of magic and the healing arts. ♦

Mark Paskell, one of the original founding directors of Project Magic, is a professional magician, actor, and writer based in Los Angeles.

How To Get Involved...

You can be part of this incredible organization. How? Check if the program exists in your area by contacting the therapy department of your local rehabilitation center or hospital.

If not, you can start one! Contact: Project Magic, Stormont-Vail West, 3707 S.W. 6th Avenue, Topeka, Kansas 6660, USA, (785) 270-4600, jdjean@stormontvail.org.