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Comedian Paul Mecurio Traded Wall Street for Standup

A chance meeting with Jay Leno got the one-time Wall Street lawyer a break in show business. Now he's an Emmy-winning Daily Show veteran about to open a one-man off-Broadway show.



'I was always the funniest lawyer in my law firm, which is kind of like being the sexiest I.T. guy,' says Paul Mecurio. PHOTO: ERIN PATRICE O'BRIEN

By *Alexandra Wolfe*

When Paul Mecurio was working as a Wall Street lawyer in his twenties, he never imagined he'd one day star in his own off-Broadway comedy show. "I was always the funniest lawyer in my law firm, which is kind of like being the sexiest I.T. guy," he says.

Mr. Mecurio, spent nearly six years leading a double life, working on Wall Street by day and performing at dive bars at night. Trying to keep his comedy gigs a secret from his Wall Street colleagues proved tricky: He once had to do a set with his back to the audience after seeing two of the firm's partners' wives in the crowd.

Today, he has left his Wall Street days long behind. Now a veteran of the comedy business, he has a host of marquee credits on his résumé. He's written for "The Daily Show," for which he won an Emmy Award, performed as a warm-up comedian for "The Colbert Report" and is currently the warm-up comedian for "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," getting the audience revved up before Mr. Colbert takes the stage.

Later this month, Mr. Mecurio will open a one-man off-Broadway show. Called "Permission to Speak with Paul Mecurio," the improv show is set to run through Aug. 15. Mr. Mecurio says that he'll base his performances on his conversations with audiences each night, coming up with jokes and banter as he goes along.

It's an unlikely journey for someone whose parents thought he might someday take over his father's floor covering business in Providence, R.I. As a child, Mr. Mecurio watched comedians such as Steve Martin, Rodney Dangerfield and George Carlin on television but didn't imagine that he could actually pursue a career in comedy. After graduating from Providence College, he went on to Georgetown University Law Center. Right after law school, he made a few short comedy films as a side project and submitted them to film festivals, but he never saw film as a future career. Instead, he got a job as a Wall Street mergers and acquisitions lawyer at Willkie, Farr & Gallagher in New York City. "The plan was, you work for 25 years, you have 2.2 kids and a white picket fence and then you retire," he says.

He kept writing jokes as a hobby. One day he noticed that Jay Leno was slated to perform at a work function he was attending. Mr. Mecurio printed out some of his jokes and gave them to Mr. Leno at the end of the night.

To his surprise, two days later, Mr. Leno called him. Mr. Mecurio thought it was his friend pranking him and told Mr. Leno, “You do a lousy Leno impression.” But it wasn’t a hoax: Mr. Leno offered to pay \$50 if he used one of Mr. Mecurio’s jokes.

A week later, Mr. Leno told one of Mr. Mecurio’s jokes on television. “The essence of the joke was that on [home improvement] shows the contractor is always under budget, on time, clean shaven, does extra work for no extra pay, when in real life they reek of alcohol, they’re hitting on your wife, they’re four months behind, and they’re stealing stuff out of your sock drawer,” he says. The joke got laughs, and Mr. Mecurio “became obsessed” with comedy, he says.



‘I love my son, but some days I wish he’d walk into the woods and never come back,’ Mr. Mecurio jokes. PHOTO: ERIN PATRICE O’BRIEN

As he moved around in his career, jumping to what is now [Credit Suisse](#) and later to Bear Stearns, he started bringing two notebooks to all of his meetings—one for deal notes and another for joke notes—and he soon realized that his work notebook was empty. He started booking his own comedy gigs on the side.

He wrestled for the next few years with whether to make comedy his career. Finally, he quit Wall Street for good. Two years later, he landed a job as one of The Daily Show's original writers through a producer who had seen him perform. There he met Mr. Colbert, who hired him as a warm-up comedian on "The Colbert Report" and later, "The Late Show."

These days, he fills his days writing material for his act, testing the jokes in clubs, talking with people about new shows and interviewing celebrity guests for his weekly podcast, The Paul Mecurio Show. He also tours the country doing standup.

His jokes often revolve around life with his wife and teenage son. He pokes fun at his wife's insistence on hiding the pickles in the fridge and bemoans the constant demands of parenting. "I love my son, but some days I wish he'd walk into the woods and never come back," he jokes. He makes fun of relationships and self-help, saying that when people ask what's more important, sex or communication, he insists, "Sex! Because no one fantasizes about communication.

He gets into politics as well, making fun of both the left and the right. Last year, he posted a YouTube video about the presidential inauguration that skewered Donald Trump but also needled Hillary Clinton. He rails against what he sees as political correctness, mocking causes he believes have gone too far. On the environmental movement: "I'm so against being green I break into people's houses, turn the lights on and leave," he jokes.

"I tend to go after the falsity in politics and the hypocrisy," Mr. Mecurio says. "Both sides get it from me."

Someday, he says, he hopes to have his own late-night show. What would he do after that? "I would actually go back and start writing and reading prospectuses" as a lawyer, he jokes.