



PHOTO BY STEFAN RADTKE

Standing up for Clean Comedy

Pelham's Shaun Eli Breidbart and his troupe of Ivy League comedians keep it funny — minus the F-bombs.

BY JESSICA JAFET

Naturally, standup comedians want to connect with their audiences and deliver thought-provoking humor that elicits lots of laughter. When Shaun Eli Breidbart, a former banker who took the plunge as a full-time funnyman more than 10 years ago, recognized that one can get those results without resorting to profanity, he decided to capitalize on a growing niche.

"I am clean, and people have described it as smart comedy," Breidbart says. "Though I would just say it is a 'lack of dumb' comedy, rather than smart — if your jokes go over the audiences' heads, that doesn't work."

The Scarsdale native and current Pelham resident is a 1983 graduate of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He used his dual major in economics and marketing to land a finance job in Manhattan. "I was a fixed-income portfolio manager," Breidbart explains. "Which I would describe as turning a big pile of someone else's money into a slightly bigger pile of someone else's money."

Although he enjoyed his work, he began dabbling more and more in comedy, with standup gigs at night and as a freelance writer who regularly sold jokes to *The Tonight Show*. His musings and zingers were heard in Jay Leno's opening monologues (and on Conan O'Brien's and Jimmy Fallon's programs, as well).

As the bookings increased, so did his comedic chops — Breidbart filled his schedule with more standup performances at

theaters, clubs, and amateur nights, along with charity events, houses of worship, and at senior centers.

In 2009, Breidbart (who performs as Shaun Eli) made a major decision to quit banking altogether and commit to his new role as professional comedian. He remembers being routinely asked where to find more clean comedy shows like his and noticed there was a growing demand for performers who would be suitable for particular clients yet could appeal to a general audience.

"I thought there should be more [of these type of shows]," he says. "So, I put together a group to do clean shows, and I wanted a name that sounded upscale and would get us corporate events. I named it the Ivy League of Comedy." Indeed, many of the comedians in the group have top-tier college backgrounds, like Breidbart.

Fellow standup comedian and Harvard graduate Karen Bergreen describes Breidbart as an observational comic and believes so-called clean shows have a huge market. "It's much more difficult to write a clean joke than a dirty one, so Shaun has carefully curated his stable of performers," she notes. "Obviously, there are times when we are dying to drop the F-bomb, but his audience makes us work just a little harder — and it's worth it."

As for recent media attention on some entertainers who have perhaps crossed the line with their material and then faced backlash, Breidbart maintains that successful jokes do not necessarily have to be offensive or vulgar.

"I think there have always been boundaries," he says. "But I think the justification of 'Hey, it is just comedy,' makes it a little harder. I don't even want to say that people are more sensitive, because there are things that some people *should* be sensitive about. I think the difference is that if the joke is racist, it is racist; if the joke is perpetuating a negative stereotype, it is not a joke that a lot of people would appreciate." He adds that he does not make fun of audience members, unless provoked.

Captivated from a young age by storytelling comedians, Breidbart looks to veteran comedian (and Westchester resident) Robert Klein