

## IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

# It's Never Too Late to Quit Your Day Job and Become a Stand-Up Comic

Shaun Eli Breidbart was a banker on Wall Street for 19 years but he gave up a lucrative career in favor of happiness.



By Pierre-Antoine Louis

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*“It’s Never Too Late” is a series that tells the stories of people who decide to pursue their dreams on their own terms.*

When taking the stage outside of New York, the stand-up comedian Shaun Eli Breidbart will often start off with a joke: “Hi, I’m Shaun Eli and I’m so happy to be here. But I’m a New Yorker — I’m happy to be anywhere I can park for free!”

Mr. Breidbart, 59, was a banker on Wall Street for 19 years, the last 13 in fixed income portfolio management. (“The easiest description of that is turning a big pile of someone else’s money into a slightly bigger pile of someone else’s money,” he said.) By New York standards, he had a fairly relaxed life, typically working 9 to 5. By choice, he said he always worked for companies that didn’t work him that hard but they also didn’t pay him that well. That was a good trade off.

“If I’d been working 80 hours a week, there’s no way I would have had time to write and perform stand-up comedy,” said Mr. Breidbart, who is single and lives in Pelham, N.Y.

When he was growing up in Bayside, Queens and Scarsdale in suburban New York, education was paramount to his Brooklyn-born father, an accountant, and his mother, who immigrated from Ukraine. There were no illusions about his path. “My parents didn’t put a lot of pressure on me,” he said. “They said I could go to any medical school I wanted.”

Mr. Breidbart ended up with an economics degree from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. But he said he became increasingly worn down by the monotony of his career choice. A woman he was dating suggested that he try stand-up comedy and take a comedy class. At the time, Mr. Breidbart was writing jokes and selling them freelance to the late-night talk show hosts Jay Leno, Jimmy Fallon and Conan O'Brien. He initially rebuffed his friend's idea because of stage fright. But curiosity got the better of him, so he gave it a try — and was happily surprised that the class helped him feel comfortable onstage. Six years later, in 2009, it was “adios to the day job.” (The following interview has been edited and condensed.)



"I get paid to make people happy. What could be better than that?" Nate Palmer for The New York Times

### **How long was being a comedian on your mind before you took the first step?**

That would be a negative number because I wasn't planning to be a comedian. When I took the class, I wasn't sure that it would work. But after the class, I started performing in open-mic nights and new talent nights. I pretty much tried to be onstage five or six times a week

at least. Six years after I started stand up comedy, I realized I had two full-time jobs. Essentially, I was a comedian and a banker and much to my parents' disappointment, I gave up the lucrative one in favor of happiness.

### **What is it about being a comedian that makes you happy?**

To strip down my job to its elements: I get paid to make people happy. What could be better than that? I suppose it was the same thing when I worked at Baskin-Robbins in high school and college, scooping and serving ice cream, but laughter has no fat, no calories, no salt and you can do it for an hour and a half at a time.

### **How has your pursuit changed your life?**

I don't have to use an alarm clock unless I have an early morning flight. And I don't take early morning flights. I'm my own boss so if somebody is a jerk, I don't have to work with them. If I want to take a break, I can take a break. If I want to travel somewhere, I book comedy shows there and it becomes a tax deduction.

### **What's next?**

I'd like to resume international travel. A year and a half or so before Covid I had started doing international shows. I worked in Ireland, the U.K., the Netherlands, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Thailand. But a lot of countries still have bad Covid numbers and a lot of people who attend English-language comedy shows overseas are tourists, so there are probably way fewer of them these days.

### **What do you wish you would have known when you were younger?**

I wish I'd known that I didn't have to do everything I was told to do because my life was kind of "this is what you do when you grow up." The idea of working in the arts never occurred to anybody in my family. In my family there are doctors, lawyers and scientists. Being smart doesn't mean you have to make your living being a doctor or a lawyer or scientist.

### **What would you tell other people who feel stuck and are looking to make a change?**

Unstick yourself. If you can find something you want to do that pays, do that. I would also say, if you're interested in stand up comedy — don't! I don't need the competition. But anything else, if you always wanted to do something, try it.

### **What lessons can people learn from your experience?**

Here's the lesson I want everybody to learn: Stop telling jokes to comedians. That's not how it works. It's our job to tell you jokes, not the other way around.

A serious lesson people can learn? I don't know. I don't think in serious terms anymore.

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*We're looking for people who decide that it's never too late to switch gears, change their life and pursue dreams. Should we talk to you or someone you know? Share your story here.*