

Improv Is No Joke - Episode 36 - Jeff Jackson

Peter: Hey everybody, I'm with the Jeff Jackson who, according to his Twitter page, is a top-50 daddy blogger, husband, a daddy, a speaker, published author and - this part I love - a superhero in training. But, more than that, he is also an accountant. So first and foremost, Jeff, thanks for taking time out of your very busy day to spend some time with me on my podcast.

Jeff: Well, thank you for inviting me Peter. I'm glad to be here.

Peter: Jeff and I, this is the first time we are actually meeting. We have been communicating back and forth via email. We were introduced by a mutual friend, Judy Carter, and for those of you who don't know Judy Carter, I interviewed her in episode number 19. So go back and listen. It was an absolute blast. So I've come to find out that Jeff and I have a lot in common. Jeff, why don't you tell the audience a little bit about yourself?

Jeff: Oh boy, where should I start?

Peter: [laughs]

Jeff: Yeah, there's a lot that's going on. I moved to New York in 96. I'm originally from Ohio. That's when I pursued my professional acting career. At that time, I had a MBA in accounting. I was working as a temp accountant and I worked for a bunch of different companies. My acting career didn't work out after a couple years, so I went into account full time. We moved just north of New York City and now my wife and I have a couple of 8-year-old twin boys and they're fabulous. One thing led to another to keep my creative spark going. I've been working on my daddy blog called Daddy is Best.

Peter: It's a very interesting blog. I read this morning one of your recent postings about your son being fired by his friends and how memories are short with kids and they forgot they were mad at him or fired and he said he wasn't going to tell them.

Jeff: [laughs]

Peter: I thought that was cute. You say that you are from Ohio, you're from the Dayton, Ohio, area and you went the Wright State University?

Jeff: That's correct.

Peter: Did you study accounting at Wright State?

Jeff: I did.

Peter: Did you ever have Maggie Houston as a professor?

Jeff: Oh yeah, Maggie is one of my best friends.

Peter: [laughs] The world just got smaller. I've known Maggie for a number years with her volunteer work for the Ohio Society of CPAs and I haven't spoken to her in a couple years but Maggie was always one of my favorite Ohio Society of CPA members.

Jeff: Oh, how about that. Yeah, she was an adjunct professor and we became friends and then we actually shared some dinners together, I think. I was married to my first wife at the time and going to graduate school.

Peter: Oh wow. I'll have to find her. I haven't talked to her for a few years but I'll have to reach out to her and tell her she has to listen to this episode because... man. You are a contributing author to the book *Go Ask Your Dad*, and that's why I realized that you were at Wright State. How did you get into this book? How did this come about?

Jeff: Well, what's interesting is that, since I've been writing my blog, which will be a little over two years in January, and I've also been on Facebook and Twitter, and I've really grown in my social media existence and participation. One of the things I came across was a daddy last year, about this time, who was looking to put together a book. He asked if I would be interested and I said sure I'm interested and I'll write you something. One thing led to another and I got including in the book and here it is. I'm very excited about it. I've been passing it out to people and trying to get them to leave reviews on Amazon. So, if you get a chance, please do that.

Peter: I most certainly will. When we get done with this interview, I'll certainly do that for you. So, this Daddy is Best, give me the essence of that. What is that message that you're trying to spread?

Jeff: Well... it's multifaceted. One of the facets that I've talked about before was that I want to keep my creative spark going and, since I've read my whole life and acted my whole life and told jokes my whole life, and so this has allowed me to funnel all that activity into one thing, Daddy is Best. I want to come up with a unique name for being with Daddy now that I'm a little older as a daddy, and I thought it'd be a nice place to share my daddy experiences. We live in a dynamic environment just north of New York City, and by dynamic I mean New York is unlike any other place because there's so many people here.

Peter: Right.

Jeff: And the people are not shy. The other thing is that my wife is african-american, which is cool. And I'm not, which is cool. We have a biracial kids and we're just exploring everything that we've gone through while raising kids. It's an incredible process. I highly recommend it. But the conspiracy is that, through history, people said "yeah I have kids, you'll love it, it'll be fun," and it

is all those things but it's the hardest thing I've ever done and you don't know you're doing it right. You're second guessing yourself all the time, when you make mistakes you feel bad, and still somehow the kids get raised. [laughs]

Peter: [laughs]

Jeff: and you don't know how they do, but they do.

Peter: I have a sixteen-year-old son and I'm 55, I had a child later in life, and you're right. It's the hardest job I've ever had but it's the best job I've ever had.

Jeff: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

Peter: But there's something about children. My son's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. When he's outside of the house, in school, he's got a job, he is an angel. He's an absolute angel. And then he comes home and you can just tell by the tone of my voice that, a lot of times, that angel leaves and the devil comes out. It's like, how could people say such nice things about you and you come home and now all you want to do is give me grief.

Jeff: Exactly. In fact, I just had that talk last night with one of my sons, and my sons are interesting because they're not identical, they're fraternal twins, and their personalities are diametrically opposed to each other. I mean, one's left brain and one's right brain. It's incredible to see how they develop considering they both came from the same place and I've heard the same thing from their teachers. Their teachers just adore them and the last time my son was giving me a hard time I was like, what are you doing this for? You're nice at school and you come home to me and give me a hard time. I'm your dad, be nice to dad. That's who a young person should be nicest to. And mommy too, but mommy wasn't here at the time. You should be nicest to mommy and daddy.

Peter: I love how you reference your wife in the book as SMM.

Jeff: SMM.

Peter: And it stands for?

Jeff: Sergeant Major Mommy.

Peter: [laughs] I read that and I started laughing hysterically. That's good. I think I may have my son started calling my wife SMM, sergeant-major mommy.

Jeff: [laughs]

Peter: I think, in today's day and age with dual incomes, I think the father's role has changed dramatically since the days of our our fathers.

Jeff: Oh absolutely. That's something that I address all the time with my daddy friends on social media: how much the daddy role has changed and how much daddies have stepped up to embrace their role. I went to a school function a couple weeks ago and there were easily half daddies. Half mommies and half daddies. Daddies and taking a much greater participation in their kids' lives than they used to do. You know when I grew up my dad didn't take care of me. God bless him, I'm not pointing fingers or anything like that, but he did come up in a different generation. Things were different in their time. I understand completely. And now that we are being asked to contribute more, I believe we are contributing more. And yet, the hard part about that, the flip side of that, is that you don't always get the support we need from wives or schools or the general public or society or culture or whatever, and that makes it hard for us. I see a lot of daddies being discouraged and frustrated about our roles as daddies, and it's been a very interesting experience for me too, especially being an older daddy, and I'm older than you are.

Peter: [laughs] You don't look it.

Jeff: Well, thank you. That's nice. But, being an older daddy, I'm a baby boomers, and our daddies were typically the silent generation of WWII.

Peter: Right.

Jeff: Now I'm being asked to participate more and it's a whole new side of you that I've never experienced before. Daddying is such a difficult thing to do, but I'm asked to explore parts of myself that I've never had to explore before. How do I deal with that and where do I get the support? Fortunately, mommy is great and she's there for me every step of the way. Not that we agree on everything all the time, nobody does that. No two humans do that. But, she was supportive of me. And so it's been a very interesting process: raising kids, becoming a daddy, experiencing what it means to be a daddy and experiencing my own personal growth in the process.

Peter: You also mentioned in the book that, between you and your wife, it's a 50-50 relationship with parenting, with household, with all that stuff that goes on. My wife and I share that same kind of a ratio. It's a 50-50 split. I gotta carry my weight, she's gotta carry her weight, and all the way. It's not just on one person.

Jeff: Yeah, absolutely. I was doing laundry this morning. I do almost all the laundry in the house. I do the bulk of the dishes. I do some cleaning. Plus, I do homework with the kids and and read and put them to bed every night. My nights are alternating nights for that. She's home probably a little bit more than I am because I work nights and weekends, and so it's probably more like 60-40 for her, but you know I definitely have to hold my share of the bargain. And that's the way

I look at it: it's a bargain, it is a partnership, we're in this together. She didn't have the kids by herself. I was definitely there, at least in the procreation portion of it.

Peter: [laughs]

Jeff: I should be here for the relationship part too.

Peter: Well put. My wife and I have a deal: she's a cleaner, she loves to clean. She's borderline a clean freak. So I do all the cooking and she does all the cleaning. Because I am Greek, I was raised in a restaurant. Well my wife's greek, she spent some time in a restaurant, but she doesn't like to cook, which is almost a sin in the Greek community.

Jeff: [laughs]

Peter: But growing up in restaurants, I find cooking to be extremely relaxing because it also allows me to use that right brain side, that creative side, through that vehicle. And this is my second wife and this has kind of worked out really well. We found that middle ground and you're right: we do not agree all the time, but we sure find a way to make it work and, just like you said as you started off, we must be doing something right because the kid seems to be well-adjusted and doing well.

Jeff: It's amazing how that happens, isn't it? When they first went to school, we didn't know how they were going to be. You think oh my god I hope they're OK. I hope they get along with people and they listen to teacher and all everything that goes with that and then, ultimately, after four years, they're doing ok. In fact, one of my son's is above his reading level in third grade. He's reading at a fourth or fifth-grade reading level. The other son we've had a lot of problems with only because he has learning disability. He was diagnosed with a ADD and so it's been a major major challenge working with him nightly, daily to get him to progress, but he's progressing. And so somehow it all comes together, it all works out, they're progressing, and meanwhile I'm getting more gray hair (because I didn't have gray before they were born) and we're surviving.

Peter: I feel your struggle with with the son with with ADHD because my son is the same way. He was diagnosed in fifth grade and it answered a lot of questions up to that point, but it does require a lot of extra work and discipline and working with that disability. It just adds a little more to the plate, but you know? In the long run, it's all worth it.

Jeff: It's all worth it. Nothing like it.

Peter: So let's switch gears here for a second: I heard the word accountant and I heard the word actor and you've done stand-up, so you're an accidental accountant as well.

Jeff: [laughs] Well you know, I got my undergraduate degree in marketing. In Dayton, Ohio, it was very difficult finding meaningful, reasonable work in marketing, and so I went back to my

college advisor and I said, what do I do? He said we'll get you an MBA in accountant, and like a fool I listened to him!

Peter: [laughs]

Jeff: and I'm good at math so I said that's fine, and so I did. I did pretty good at accounting and I was fortunate enough to get hired by a big company out of graduate school. But I don't really have the accountant *je ne sais quoi*. I don't have an accountant mindset overall. I mean, I can do the work, but it's just not there for me.

Peter: I understand. [laughs]

Jeff: When the opportunity came up to pursue my professional acting career, and I've been acting my whole life too, so I thought what the heck. I was lucky enough to actually start making some money at it for a while, for a couple years anyway, and so I took my show on the road to New York. I moved to New York City and I was over there for a couple years. And then fortunately I was able to support myself as I pursued my professional acting career as a temp accountant and I worked with a very big company. It was great, I got a lot of jobs doing that, so, again, my heart wasn't in it at that time. I was doing temp work for a while. But then, after a while, the money started running out from the acting so I thought well I gotta do it full time. I did, which led to another series of changes and moves. It was difficult in this area to find accounting work. A sales job came up very very close by to where we live. I thought well let me try that. I'm a friendly guy. I can do this. After so many years in accounting... it's really hard being an accountant, which nobody tells you about graduate school, because you sit at a computer for 8-10 hours a day, nobody likes you in corporate America because no matter what you do, you're always counterproductive to what they're trying to do. The numbers don't say this but we want that, bla bla bla, so I said let me try sales. I went into sales and I actually enjoyed it a lot, but now I'm just looking to expand my creative horizons by going into writing and speaking professionally.

Peter: So you're an accountant but you didn't possess that ability to sit in front of a computer and be extremely... I guess the word is introverted. From a Myers-Briggs perspective, you're very much an extrovert. You get your energy from other people, where accountants can generate that introverted energy. So you're in sales. What type of sales?

Jeff: It's retail. I sell appliances and TVs and work with a big company on the East Coast. They're only on the east coast, but it's a very big company, very well known in the appliance industry throughout the nation and they've given me some sales training and I've picked up some things on my own. That's been growth process too because I was more introverted than I am now, even though I've never been a true classic introvert. It's allowed me to grow, as well as with my parenting at the same time, and parenting is also about sales.

Peter: Oh yeah.

Jeff: And so it's allowed me to grow as a person and as a salesperson and so now I thought I would integrate those concepts because there seems to be an opportunity there, and then I came across a statistic the other day that's like three forty-three percent more small businesses in a short period of time, 5-10 years, than there are today. That means that those people are going to want CPAs or accounting people helping them with their books and managing their businesses. This is a perfect time because accounts are typically not good at sales, not good at marketing or selling themselves, and I think there will come a time when, as you mentioned, when the computer is doing most of the work. So accountants will need to be able to to market and sell and differentiate themselves and tailor their products to specific businesses or markets so that they can ultimately survive too. And so I thought that would be a great opportunity, and so all of this is coming out at the same time. I'm ongoing as a salesperson and a speaker.

Peter: That's a very good point that you make. Traditionally, accountants have not been known to be the best sales, marketing people, but it's not the seventies and eighties and nineties anymore. I talk to audiences about this as well. They gotta become better at building relationships and the ability to sell themselves, their firm, their services in order to grow their businesses. If they're not going to end up ultimately growing, the way things looking and if there is no succession plan in place, then they will ultimately get bought by another firm and gobbled up. And even the larger firms. I think sales training for accountants is a must now, and they should be taking some type of sales training courses.

Jeff: Thank you, I think so too, and you know it's not a mysterious process. I don't do anything in my sales that is pulling magic words out of the hat to get people to buy. It's more of just establishing a personal relationship and fulfilling the customer's needs, and then closing the sale. It's a very simple process but there are steps that you have to go through to be able to satisfy the customer. It's all about satisfying the customers so that you can get the repeat business and people will come back and and spread the word because that will also provide more word of mouth advertising, which is the best advertising that you can get. So I think it's really valuable for accountants to learn how to to market and sell themselves.

Peter: Yeah, and I think the big piece in sales. Those who are extremely successful at it have one key skill that they possess: the ability to listen in order to ascertain what the needs and want of the customer or client is so that they can match them up to the right service or the right product. I think, a lot of times, people when they're in front of a client and they've got a service they're trying to sell, that is the main part of their mind. That's their "agenda" so they're not truly listening to their client talk about what their needs and wants are, and then they're not making that match. So I think listening is probably the key skill in sales.

Jeff: I think so too. I agree with that. Listening comes as part of asking the right questions.

Peter: Right

Jeff: And when you ask that question and you listen to the answers, and then you proceed from there because ultimately we want the product or service to match with the customer's problem or need. Listening is extremely important because you have to make the customer feel like they are being listened to.

Peter: Exactly. That listening skill is not just sitting there, not saying a word, nodding your head, or just repeating back what the customer or client said. That listening, that's part of it, but it's also asking the right questions. So asking the statement, probing more, because I don't know who it was... I got this back when I was a banker in my sales training. You gotta peel back the onion. You have about seven no's or seven roadblocks along the way in order to find out what the true want or need or issue is, and you just gotta keep coming at it with different angles, with different questions.

Jeff: Absolutely. You have to do that. The difficulty for accountants is that accountants have the numbers. They have the reports. They say here you need this, and realistically a business or a custom may need those things, but you have to convince them that they need those things. You have to say okay, I think we need these things because this will satisfy this need. This will help you do this. It's establishing a relationship, either inside of business or outside the business. Inside business and corporate America's is equally important too because, as I mentioned before, nobody likes accountants.

Peter: [laughs]

Jeff: An accountant will say "hey I'm from Jeff from accounting, you have a problem," and nobody wants to go through that process where they feel they have a problem. So you have to establish a relationship. You have to match what you can do with what the customer needs.

Peter: Exactly, and in corporate America I've heard the CFO be referred to as the CFno.

Jeff: [laughs]

Peter: We do have a stereotype, and you brought that up. Accountants have a stereotype in corporate America that, when we show up, we're coming with a problem versus getting to know those other individuals within the organization, not just at a professional level but as a personal level, and when you show up have them look at you as Pete coming or Jeff coming up, not the guy from accounting. That changes that whole relationship. You've created, to some degree, a friendship, and you're more likely going to be able to accomplish what you're going to do if you've got that friendship role versus a perceived adversarial role.

Jeff: Absolutely, absolutely. That changes everything. the relationship... it's a process, and once you reach your customer or a business partner and they understand that you're a person and you're trying to not only do your job but relate to them on a personal and business level so that you can satisfy the needs, it changes the whole context and dynamic of the relationship so that

it's not me versus them or here comes Jeff from accounting to tell me what I'm doing wrong. It's like, Jeff is here too because he understands my problems and he's trying to help me fix the problems, whether it's in operations or sales or marketing or whatever.

Peter: Exactly, exactly. And the other challenge you will have in in this area is they might agree and say yeah we need it, but not right now.

Jeff: [laughs]

Peter: And I think the challenge is to bring the urgency to it. That, actually, they needed it then, they need it now and then they need it tomorrow.

Jeff: It's a process, we keep going back to that word. It's a whole process. Getting their need in front of them so that they understand the way that they needed it. That this is useful information for them. That's true for CPA's, the outside CPAs too, because the issue will come up. Not only in providing specific reports for whatever business they're working with but the issue will come up about price, and they will have to be able to justify the value of the reports that they provide to the business so that the business can operate and still maintain viability or profitability of the business.

Peter: We, as accountants, need to be looked at as a part of the business, not the cost of doing business. We talk about the profession, that trusted business advisor, that we we are cog. We support everybody within. We're part of the bigger picture. We're not just a cost of doing business, and that's the other stereotype that that needs to be broken.

Jeff: Absolutely. I hear that all the time. I'm more of a liability than an asset, and I don't want to do that. I want to be an asset to you. Ultimately it's all about the business.

Peter: Right.

Jeff: You want to run the business. We have to give the business what they need to be able to run, but there's a good way and a bad way to do that. You can do that as a business partner or you can do that by banging heads and saying you need you need this this, it will help you, but I'm not really interested and I have no more vested interest in how your business turns. That's where accountants need to turn the corner.

Peter: Right. It's not about me the accountant. It's about my client. What's the best for the business? The more than I understand their business – not just the financials but understand their business – then, when I do have these reports, I can say you need this and this is why, and as you know in sales, to have that benefit. What's the benefit for them? What's in it for them? In order to get by, you have to be able to articulate that in a way that the person sitting across the table from, who might not be an accountant, understands.

Jeff: Right, absolutely. When I was in corporate America I trained a lot of people on accounting concepts and you can see the light bulbs go off when they understand. I mean, because ultimately accountants talk about debits and credits, which is confusing as heck, and nobody wants to understand that. It's too technical, it's too much math, blah blah blah. If you talk to non accountants about when you do this then it means this as it relates to the business. They're like, oh, so that's how that happens. You see the light bulbs go off in their head and then they start realizing oh ok, so that's what accounting can do for me.

Peter: You basically described... you're a translator. Because accounting is the language of business and not everybody understands that language, and you're able to take the technical pieces of it and put it in context that the other person can understand, without using the accounting jargon.

Jeff: Because its technical and it's complex and it's boring and all that stuff. But it's meaningful. It does have meaning and it's important for accountants to be able to convey to their business partners and customers that it is meaningful for them.

Peter: Exactly, and I wish you all the best on this journey. Part of the conversation we were having on email about this, and I was giving you some ideas, and you were using the term sales accounting and I think I added onto it: sales accounting, it's not an oxymoron.

Jeff: It's not an oxymoron. It's maybe two words that should go together.

Peter: Right. They're two words that should go together, need to go together, and I hope that, in your speaking venues and you're speaking business, that you're able to convey that to your audience and have them connect with you on that and realize that I need to become a better salesperson, in order to help my business, my company, grow.

Jeff: Right. Function and grow, because ultimately it's all about growth. If you don't grow, you die, because who knows what's going to happen to the economy... not only in four years but five to 10 years or 20 years. You want to be able to lay the groundwork for it now with technology and information and partnerships to be able to do grow.

Peter: Exactly. Jeff, it's been a pleasure meeting you. I'm finally glad we got a chance to talk one-on-one. I was just completely fascinated by the the *Daddy is Best* part of your background and the accounting peace and how your weaving, really, all of this together into one, I think, sustainable speaking career. Hopefully, our paths will cross and we'll meet person to person but I wish you all the best in your business, your family and everything you're doing. Once again, thank you for taking time to be part of my podcast.

Jeff: Oh, thank you so much for inviting me here. I've enjoyed it so much. It's been a pleasure and I'm looking forward to seeing you too, in person.