

Jason Stuart

A Stand Up Kind of Guy

FOR COMIC AND ACTOR JASON STUART AIDS IS NO LAUGHING MATTER

by Michael Szymanski

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Jason Stuart is looking trimmed down these days. Walking in a brisk step along the streets blocked off by the Los Angeles Marathon in his Hollywood neighborhood, Stuart greets a Latino family, flirts with a fireman, and has a passel of African American girls follow him for a block after he talks to them. "It's nice to appeal to all kinds of people. I always try to do that in my act, appeal to everyone," says Stuart, who recently lost fifteen pounds with the help of an Overeaters Anonymous diet.

Stuart is an openly gay comic who plays to diverse crowds throughout the country, even in places where he knows the audience may get ugly. He's done a lot of television, such as *Murder, She Wrote*, the HBO movie *Gia*, and some features. He's hosted many hospice and AIDS events, such as Project Angel Food, APLA's Summer Festival at Universal, three times, Aid for AIDS, and L.A. Shanti—all while watching close friends die. Yet, he always tries to smile and stay funny.

Stuart first became a gay and AIDS activist in 1992. He had already done an RSVP Cruise, but still wasn't out of the closet. "Everybody knew that I was gay, but I never talked about it. I didn't have any gay material. I just had my old act as a goofball. I remember being scared to death. I'd let them write about me in the papers as a gay person. For the first time. Doing this AIDS benefit!"

A few months later, he came out in a big way on *Geraldo*. By then, Stuart had already lost an ex-boyfriend to the disease in 1985, when Barry Robbin, the Crown Prince in *The King and I* in the Broadway revival, died. He lost other friends, an acting coach, then more friends. Stuart now performs for the National Association of Campus Activities at colleges. Just as when he's in a straight club, Stuart often picks out one guy in the audience and flirts with him. "Some think that I'm actually flirting, but it's not for real, it's to show that it's the same way

straight people kid around all the time.” Handling hecklers is part of the business, but when Reverend Fred Phelps comes with his vitriolic antigay signs, it gets harder to handle. Stuart’s been picketed twice in Kansas City, once at Disney World/Orlando, and once in Topeka, Phelps’ hometown.

His Internet site also garners him fan mail. “I was headlining at the Funny Bone in St. Louis, and some woman came over to me and confessed, ‘My son died of AIDS a year ago. This is the first time I’ve been out. Thank you for making me laugh.’ What can you say? I wanted to break down and cry. I was only doing my goofy show. We forget sometimes the impact we can have. You might make some people uncomfortable, but you can’t do anything about that.”

Stuart knows about gay bashing and verbal harassment from his junior high and senior high experiences in Hollywood and West Hollywood, at a time before the 10% Program for gay and gay curious students was implemented. “I had no one to turn to, I just knew that I was bad. And that I’d better shut up about it. I was afraid.” On his locker someone scraped ‘Fag’ and Stuart saw it every day. “It really changed me. To the stupid kid that did it, it meant nothing, but to me it made me want to kill myself.”

He did find he was slowly killing himself with bulimia during his late teens and early twenties. He got help. “Food and being gay were the same thing to me. They were connected. I wanted to be an actor so bad. That was my drug. It saved me as a child.” Recently, as an actor, he played a “rude trilogy”: on *Lost & Found* as a rude jewelry salesman; on WB’s *Charmed* as a rude restaurateur; and on *The Drew Carey Show* as a rude manager of an appliance department. Then, there’s the way he deals with the difficulties of the AIDS joke. “I talk to straights during my act. I say, ‘Look, take it from the gay guy. This is the nineties. Practice safe sex. Ladies, have yourselves laminated. It burns a little, but after a while, it’s fabulous! I’m wearing a Star Trek condom right now. It’s called a Klingon.’ Then I’ll point at a guy and say, ‘I will take you where no man has ever taken you before.’” While he may make fun of the process of safe sex, he doesn’t make fun of AIDS. “I was in Houston [at *The Laugh Stop*] and some guy who had like two teeth in his head, screamed out, ‘AIDS! You all have

AIDS!' Now, I knew this idiot didn't do it because he meant to be mean—he was just ignorant. So I said to the audience, 'This guy has really embarrassed himself. Let's not hate him. It's only because he has one tooth in his head. Let's take a moment and pray for him.' And we did. Then I said, 'Let's give him a round of applause because we don't want him to feel bad about how badly dressed he is!' See? They love that."

Michael Szymanski publishes in mainstream and gay publications alike, including Entertainment Weekly and Frontiers.