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## Jason Stuart is happy to be a middle man

By MADELEINE PECK Special to the Times-Union

Jason Stuart has struggled for years to make it as a comedian and an actor, and he's finally made it to the middle.

He's not a huge star, but he's not starving either, and that's a good thing, he said.

"I never thought I'd be in the middle," Stuart said by phone from Los Angeles, where he's reading a new script. "I thought I'd be either a big star or utter failure."

Stuart, who has several one-man shows to his name and appearances on television shows such as Will and Grace, My Wife and Kids, House M.D. and Fat Actress, brings his stand-up act to the Comedy Zone next week. He'll do a benefit Wednesday night for the Northeast Florida AIDS Network, then stick around for shows through the weekend.

For Stuart, making it to the middle wasn't easy. In 1993, he came out as a gay actor on the Geraldo show. He says he was already out to friends and family, but not professionally.

"The reaction was a mixed bag ... some people were comfortable and didn't care at all, and there are other people who spend their lives creating hell for gay people."

He's at the forefront of a new generation of actors who are openly homosexual but play a broad range of characters, from the "stereotypically gay guy in the office that thinks everyone else is gay" to straight characters.

"It's about work and working hard," he said. "When you're gay and over 30, it doesn't just come. You have to be able to reinvent yourself."

But Stuart is not just a funny actor; he's a comedian whose latest tour, "Looking for Mr. Right," plumbs the chaotic dating scene, and that's something everyone can relate to.

For example, Stuart recently met a guy he thought was nice; they'd gone on a date and things seemed to be going smoothly. Then just before their second date, the guy called in a frenzy, saying someone was following him. It turns out the guy was on crystal meth. For Stuart, it wasn't just a turn-off, it became material for his stage act.

On stage, Stuart's show is based on making a connection with his audience. "My material changes all the time," he said. "I try to find out who's in my audience and make it a fun and joyous experience."

Stuart doesn't shy away from controversial issues such as, say, gay marriage. "It's the year 2005," he said. "Let us marry each other and we'll stop marrying you."

He closes each show with a question-and-answer session where he invites the audience to ask him about anything.