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SPECIAL ISSUE

VOILÀ!

MEET MAGIC AL,
just one **favorite** in
our annual look at
what we love most
on Long Island

ENTERTAINER

Magic Al Is Magically Delicious

BY ANNE BRATSKAIR

FOR 21 YEARS, Al Garber — affectionately known as Magic Al — has played Long Island's birthday party circuit, entertaining parents and children alike with his fine-tuned balance of silliness and magic.

To watch a performance by the wiry, 41-year-old putty-faced Syosset resident (and I have, at least 10 times between my own two children, Nick and Kate, not to mention dozens more at their friends' birthday parties) is to get a firsthand look at a man who really knows kids — what makes them tick, what astonishes them and what makes them roar with laughter.

Sure, he's a good magician: He can make birds appear out of thin air, cause flowers to wilt and then stand again, and pull a series of 20 balls out of his mouth without breaking a sweat. But there's more.

"What's your favorite magic word?"



Newsday Photo / Bill Davis

he'll ask a birthday boy. "Abracadabra," the child will respond. "Have a banana?" Al will repeat. "You want me to have a banana right in the middle of your birthday party?" Or, he'll place a giant spider on his shoulder and continue with his act as though nothing is unusual. The audience shrieks until Al finally notices and mock-faints.

"I think the combination of slapstick, word mix-up and magic is great. I act

"Magic Al" Garber brings smiles to seriously ill children and volunteers in the pediatrics ward at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset.

like such a nut to get those belly laughs. I probably am the silliest man in the world," Garber says, claiming the antics of Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello and the Three Stooges as inspiration.

"I was just a funny kid," he says of his career choice. "My parents told me to disappear, so I became a magician." His own children, Jeremy, 9, and Hali, 5, are exposed to Dad's shtick on a regular basis. "I'm always doing crazy

stuff, like when they're in a bath, I'll come in a pirate's costume and say, 'Ahoy, Maties, how's the water?' Or I do this grandma froggy character for them and I put on a babushka and a funny voice."

He is popular enough to command \$350 (and up) for a party on the Island. His gigs have included parties for all three of shock-jock Howard Stern's daughters, a show at the Westbury Music Fair and a couple of upcoming dates at Caroline's, the comedy club in the city. But at least one day a week he works for a fraction of his usual fee at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, where, sponsored by the Starlight Foundation, he performs for seriously ill children.

"He's amazing," says Patty Weiner, director of child life and education services in the department of pediatrics. "He's sensitive, respectful and understanding of the children's needs and brings many, many smiles to their faces and giggles in a very difficult time."

It's hard for Al to believe that he's still doing birthday parties. "My dream is to host my own kid's TV show and be discovered. I always felt like if Steven Spielberg saw how I handled kids, he'd say, 'Kid, come with me.'" But he still gets a charge out of it. "That's my Broadway," he says of the birthday-party circuit. ●

Anne Bratskeir covers fashion for Newsday.