

Building Hope - One Dream At A Time

By Chuck Hagee



From the ashes of a family tragedy has arisen a human phoenix who combines the imagination and showmanship of an actor with the practicality of a tradesman. As Sam Rayburn, the nation's most famous Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, once opined, "A jackass can kick a barn down, but it takes a carpenter to build one."

Paul DiMeo is that carpenter, that actor and that human phoenix. He is "the carpenter with attitude on ABC television's two-time Emmy winning Extreme Makeover: Home Edition."

Second only to the show's host, Ty Pennington, DiMeo's specialty is creating imaginative children's bedrooms. Perhaps that stems from his own heart wrenching experience as a five year old child in Media, Pennsylvania, a Delaware County suburb of Philadelphia.

"The family was at a wedding when we got a call from my uncle who told us our home was on fire. When we got home it had burned to the ground," DiMeo revealed in a recent interview from his present home in Los Angeles, CA.

"All the contractors in the area were on strike so my father and I set about rebuilding it ourselves. The whole community came together to help us and that really got me interested in building as well as helping others," he said.

But, as the youngest son of five children in his Italian family, Paul DiMeo also had another passion in life -- acting. That led him to Point Park College in Pittsburgh, PA, where he majored in Theater Arts. Just as the three rivers merge together in "Steel Town PA" so did DiMeo's three talents and loves -- acting, music and carpentry.

He built stage sets for the Pittsburgh Playhouse while simultaneously perfecting his acting skills. He landed roles in such diverse performances as Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and "Romeo & Juliet," the musical "Guys and Dolls" and drama "The Changeling."

As if acting and carpentry were not enough, DiMeo also perfected his musical skills by playing piano, guitar, mandolin and french horn, as well as singing. He's now working on mastering the fiddle.

"Extreme Makeover has afforded me the opportunity to bring everything together. We have two teams on the show -- Alpha and Bravo. I'm on Bravo Team and we have put together our own band," DiMeo said.

"After we finish our 14 hour days on the show Bravo Team will often go to a local night spot and play. I usually play piano and guitar," he said.

From Pittsburgh, DiMeo took his building/acting skills to the Big Apple. There he used both gifts on and off stage -- building sets and performing at such venues as the Dance Theater of Harlem, the Yiddish Theater, Carnegie Hall and at various on and off Broadway theaters.

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But, there was always that carpenter tagging along just below the footlights. Paul was one of the first "loft Living" movement leaders -- renovating lofts and brownstones. One of his primary carpentry efforts was the renovation of revolutionary America's Aaron Burr's historical residence in lower Manhattan.

"My buddy and I worked on that house for 18 months -- inside and outside. We even redid old fixtures throughout the house. It's very cool," DiMeo said. Burr's carriage house at 17 Barrow St. is now one of New York City's finest restaurants -- "One If By Land-Two If By Sea."

After 17 years in New York it was off to the West Coast where he continued both his leadership in the "Loft Living" movement and renovating the homes of many of tinseltown's high profile residents. And, in the style of another Hollywood actor, the late Robert Ulrich, who portrayed the movie and TV detective "Spencer," DiMeo took up residence in an old firehouse in Los Angeles.

That is also where he met his wife, Kelly, a native of Los Angeles. They married in 1992 and moved into the former home of one of early films' most prolific and successful stars, Tom Mix. As fate would have it, once again DiMeo's past attached itself to his present, if only in a symbolic manner.

Tom Mix, an early cowboy star of celluloid, way ahead of Gene Autry or Roy Rogers, was also born and raised in Pennsylvania -- near the Cameron County town of Driftwood in the north central part of the state. It's location is at the apex of an imaginary triangle connecting DiMeo's home in southeastern Pennsylvania to his college days in western Pennsylvania -- three touchstones, as his acting, carpentry and music.

Through all the twists and turns along his multi-faceted life journey, DiMeo arrived at, what is self evident to any viewer of Extreme Makeover:Home Edition, his passion for helping people -- especially children. "I try to include kids in whatever I do. They see things with an unclouded view. I look for a child's passion in considering what I'm going to do," he said.

"We did a story about a camp for disabled children in Missouri. It is one of my favorites because it allowed those kids to be themselves. In another segment we did a school and a house together in Prince Georges County Maryland. That was really gratifying," DiMeo said.

Extreme Makeover: Home Edition gets nearly 7,000 requests per week, according to DiMeo. "We do 25 make overs a year. Which ones we take on is determined by which projects have something about their story that is different from others," he said.

But, he admitted, there is also a very pragmatic element of the decision making process known as weather. "We try to stay away from the northern states in winter and the southern states in the summer," he said.

"We also follow up on jobs that have been done to see how the people have adapted to their new surroundings. In some cases it's a real hoot. Some people don't change a thing from the way we gave it to them. It's almost like they think its a museum that can't be disturbed," DiMeo exclaimed.

But, as uplifting and gratifying as the projects are to both the Extreme Makeover crews and the grateful recipients, they have not been immune to the recession. "A few years ago when the economy was good we had no trouble finding contractors for the projects. Now they are much tougher to find," DiMeo revealed.

The whole Makeover concept depends on the gratuity of contracting firms, according to DiMeo. And, in these hard times that gratuity, in many cases, is fighting a home-grown financial battle to survive.

"I hope this effort to change peoples' lives and provide new homes for deserving families is bigger than any one person, or contractor, or TV show. I hope it just keeps on going," DiMeo said.

To encourage that end Paul DiMeo will be the featured speaker at the Capital Home and Garden Show, February 25 to 28, 2010, in Washington, DC. "I'm going to have a dual message. How we can lessen our energy consumption and how the entire community can become involved in changing lives," DiMeo said.

And, what better teacher than the man's man who is not ashamed to shed a tear on national television in bringing happiness and hope to a child's dream of home, love and security. Up from the ashes of a family tragedy has come this human phoenix.



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