

## ***See you down the road: Episode 2: Joel Jeske***

Book Kennison: Welcome to the Circus Voices podcast, from circustalk.com. I'm Book Kennison.

You're listening to *see u down the road*. True circus stories, told by the artists who lived them. On today's episode: Joel Jeske. Joel Jeske is a clown, director, writer, and artist based in New York City. Joel came out as a gay man at a relatively advanced age, and in this episode, he tells the story of his coming out—and the events that followed. Here's Joel Jeske.

Joel Jeske: Forty-one. I came out at 41. It was not a celebration; it was not an explosion; it was not even surrounded by friends, everyone screaming *I am what I am*. I finally came to terms with myself crouching at one end of an overstuffed leather couch in a marriage counselor's office. At that point, to be quite honest, my marriage of seven years was basically dead. I think the first coffin nails were going in when I went on tour with Big Apple Circus for the first time. When you're in a relationship, or when you're married, that is, to another performer, there's an extra level of stress. Careers are going to diverge, or one is going to take off and the other one isn't. We just grew farther and farther and farther apart.

Growing up, it was very important for my brother and I to be good sons. First of all, I'm Midwestern. I was raised Lutheran. I know how to compartmentalize—really well. I never really took any of my homosexual feelings seriously, other than they might manifest themselves in a really codependent male friendship. My brother had come out when I was still in college, and when my brother came out he really took every aspect of gay life very seriously. So he was volunteering for AIDS patients, and he was fighting for gay rights. How my parents felt about it—it wasn't that they didn't accept him, they were accepting of it, it's just that they were saying—fine, be gay, just don't do anything about it. My brother and I are very close, and we were living near each other in Chicago. And a lot of these patients he would visit with and take care of, I would go along with him. So here I am, in my early 20s, and surrounded by, you know, either older gay men to which the party is over, holding their lives in their hand like an egg, desperate not to drop it; at the same time, I'm looking at other gay men in the throes of AIDS, and there was a time when I was just out of college that there was literally a funeral almost every other week.

I was trying to work this career in a way my parents understood. I always talk about, you know, that point in my life, it's like being in an airplane that never lands. Where you're just circling the airport—and what do you do? What do you do while you're waiting to touch down and finally get on with your life? Well you put on a clown show. So that's what I did. I put on a clown show in Chicago, got a little buzz about it, put on a second one, and then—very much in secret—auditioned and got accepted into Clown College. I was class of 96 in Clown College; after that, when I graduated, I was offered a contract to go on the Blue unit.

Going to Clown College, and getting into Clown College, I thought, great, this is all gonna work out, you know, I felt like this is what it's going to be. Anything that I felt, whether it was attraction to people in Clown College, whether it was wanting that feeling of belonging—still, once again, very much kept it to myself. Even getting on the road, once I ended up on Ringling Bros., there was no consideration of really embracing my homosexuality. It was not a step *into* belonging, it was not a step *into* a community, it was, for the most part, a step *away*, further ostracizing myself.

When I was on Kaleidoscope (I was transferred from the Blue unit over to Kaleidoscope for the second year of its tour) that's when I met my...that's when I met my ex-wife. We had a long-distance relationship that seemed to be holding; when I left the circus it was like, what are we gonna do now? She was at an age, and I was at an age, that we naturally assume that, okay, it's time for us to get married, let's look for someone to get married to.

We had been working professionals in New York for about seven years. I don't know if I was looking to get caught, I don't know if it's because I thought—if I passively wanted out of my marriage, but while I was away on a gig my wife basically found my homoerotic stash. She looked at it; she saw the place she was in; she saw the state our marriage was in—and she said, *what the hell is all this*. I said let's at least go to a marriage counselor. So there were four days of living together...every night we were talking well into three in the morning, and it was....I mean it is farcical, reconsidering the conversations and what I was saying to her. What was I—what was going on in my brain?

My ex-wife decided to share our news with everyone via social media. My reaction was not to fight against it. Everything she was saying was, for the most part, true. Now, if she wanted to consider our seven-year marriage a fraud, then I'm gonna let her do that, because, for the most part, it was. In terms of the divorce, I just kinda took all responsibility for it. Just kinda stepped away from social media to let her vent.

Well, at a time in my life when I thought I didn't have anything—being separated from my wife, you know, struggling to make a career in New York City—the circus stepped in and gave me an opportunity, gave me a next step, out of nowhere really. An audition for Cirque du Soleil came along. And I didn't want to do it—it was for their new show *Banana Shpeel*—the audition came along for Cirque du Soleil, I nailed it, I got offered a contract, and suddenly, you know, for the next year and a half or so, my direction was very clear. That is one thing I feel I owe a tremendous deal of gratitude to the circus for. You know, when you got that contract, the future is clear. So that was a tremendous benefit.

I was performing in Germany; I was at the Apollo in Dusseldorf. The housing situation—I was in this gigantic apartment. I don't know why they gave me this huge apartment, but I was in this four-bedroom apartment. It was sitting there, staring out at the town of Dusseldorf, waiting day after day for the show to start, that I realized: my surroundings are not going to define who I am. I can't look to a show; I can't look to these things to define myself.

My parents were defined by their jobs and where they worked; we were all defined by where we lived, we were all defined by what church...it was all external things that defined who we were. And if there was gonna be a place that I belong, I have to belong to myself first.

And so it was right about that time that online I connected with my current partner. We communicated online for about a year and a half. Finally, we were going to meet. He lived in North Carolina at the time, and we were finally gonna meet. I said, two things: I'm either gonna come to North Carolina, or you're gonna come up to New York—what's it gonna be? And he said well, I'm gonna come up to New York, because he wasn't out to his family yet.

Over a little bit of time, it got to the point where it was like, alright, his job was wrapping up in North Carolina, and I said well, you know, are we gonna move in together? And we finally made a serious commitment to each other; we've been together now for—seven years? Eight years? Oh, I hope he doesn't hear this, because I'm gonna get in a lot of trouble if I don't know how many years we've been together. I think almost, including all the time we spent online, I think we've been together for nine years.

But we moved in, and I was home for two months, and suddenly I got to go do German varieties for two years. And it was an experience for him, because he'd never been out of the US before; I have him flying across the Atlantic, visiting me wherever we were performing. I toured with Big Apple Circus in 2015 and 2017 he would join me on the road for a couple of weeks at a time. The best thing about it is—he pursues his art, I pursue my art, and now we have our children, we have our two rescue dogs, so it's like we got our own little—now, after all this time, it's like I've got an actual—I can honestly and confidently claim now I actually got a family.

“A clown who is crying on the inside is a terrible clown.” Because you get a tremendous amount of joy from causing laughter, from creating laughter in people, and creating that connection with the audience. Which is why I say, no matter how troubled my brain was, that performance was my escape. Because I was out there making fresh connections with people, you know, sharing fresh energy. I can be sick as a dog, I can be in the worst mood on the face of the earth, but slapping on that makeup, putting on that costume—I find the external trappings of being a clown to be incredibly uplifting. Yeah. A clown who is crying on the inside—not a very good clown.

I turned 50 a year ago—no two years ago. Ugh, don't remind me. Now I'm having another big, you know, artistic reevaluation of everything, of where I stand, and what I'm doing, and am I pursuing this, and am I pursuing that, and do I want to tour any more—that type of thing. What makes it different is having a man in my life. Having this small family. Our relationship has been embraced by his family, I've had him home to see my family, and there's that sense—there's that true sense of belonging. I belong to him, he belongs to me, the two dogs belong to us—yes, they're dogs...

It's easy for someone from the outside and look at somebody else and say: *this is what this person needs*. It's very difficult to acknowledge when you're in the midst of it. There are a lot of decisions that I've made, and directions I took—for example, there's that idea of should I have

gotten married in the first place? Now, in retrospect, I'm like, what was that—who was that marriage for? And what was that marriage for?

If there's one thing I would change in the past ten years, or the past 20 years, even the past 25 years—I would trust more. Because so many of the decisions I made, and so many of the directions I went, and so much of the way I acted—was fundamentally due to a fundamental lack of trust in everybody. If I were to explain it, or to analyze it, I would say I probably didn't trust myself, to truly go and take that leap, and know that I was going to be okay.

Book: Thanks to Joel Jeske for talking to us.

*see u down the road* is produced by me and Zoe Kennison.

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For more about Joel, and the people, places, and shows you just heard about, check the show notes at [circustalk.com/news](http://circustalk.com/news). I'm Book Kennison. See you down the road.

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