

My Story – Joe Francis

If life is a ride, which it surely is, then mine has got to be the balls-out wildest roller coaster in the park. I don't mind: I know any life is going to have its ups and downs. Only an idiot would buy a ticket to a roller coaster that didn't have turns, climbs, loops and dives, and anyone who really wants his money's worth is going to look for the highest, fastest ride he can find. For me, the same is true of life. And while I've never spent much time thinking about the past, there's been so much written about me lately that is misleading, untrue or simply a lie that I thought it might be fun to take a look back and finally put this wild story down on paper (or pixels) as it actually happened.

I suppose I owe my life to the art of the pickup. If a certain young man hadn't approached a certain young woman on a beach many years ago, I wouldn't be telling this story at all. The young man was Raymond Francis, my father, and on a Long Island beach one summer, he approached a pretty blonde Austrian girl named Maria to ask, "Would you like to go out?" Thirty-eight years later, they are still married. My lesson from this story: If you see a pretty girl on the beach and want to talk to her, don't hesitate! You never know where it's going to lead. Over the years, I've approached thousands of pretty girls on beaches all over the world, and what it's led me to is a lifetime of great memories and, unbelievably, a multimillion-dollar company.

I was born on April Fools' Day in 1973 in Atlanta, Georgia. My parents had moved there from New York after my father left his career in advertising to run a business called Daddy Crisp Potato Chips. Dad was a tireless hard worker with a constant, even obsessive drive to succeed. As a result, he wasn't around much during my childhood. By contrast, Mom was always home. She was loving, even doting, but she wasn't much of a disciplinarian. I was generally left to my own devices as a child, and as restless little boy, I took full advantage of it. I was constantly looking for diversions. When I was very small, I thought one of my sister's Barbie dolls was hot. I stole her and carried her around with me for weeks, calling her my girlfriend. But even as a young child, I suspected that she wasn't anatomically correct, and I eventually had to end the relationship.

As early as first grade in Atlanta, I felt unchallenged and bored in school, until I met a little blonde girl who offered to play "Show Me Yours, and I'll Show You Mine." A teacher was shocked to find us in the middle of this innocent game. I was reprimanded and sent outside to think about what an awful little boy I was. I didn't get it: What did I do wrong? The blonde girl was a willing, even eager participant. We didn't touch each other and nobody got hurt. But the principal vigorously tried to convince me that being curious about girls' bodies wasn't just bad; it was a sin against all God's creation. For me, there was a disconnect here. I didn't get it. I didn't invent girls' bodies, God did, right? I always wonder what happened to that little blonde girl.

My first true crush came not long after. Miss Davis was a teacher's assistant. I remember her as a tall, slender woman with great breasts, the face of an angel and the kind of eyes you can lose yourself in. What the hell am I talking about. I was 6. The point is, I was in love. For some reason, I decided that if I placed an upturned thumbtack on the seat of her chair, it would impress her favorably. I watched excitedly as Miss Davis took her seat. She screamed, jumped to her feet and scanned the room, demanding to know who the culprit was. I thrust my hand in the air. "Me! Me!" I grinned. I don't know what I was expecting for my candor. A kiss? A ride home with a stop for ice cream? What I actually got was a few days of suspension and the principal's smirking remark to my mother that "If all children were like Joe, then people wouldn't have children."

When I was seven, my father announced that the family was moving across the country. He unfolded a map on the table, gestured grandly and said, "This is going to be our new home!" It was one of those old tourist maps of Southern California, decorated with cartoon figures representing different regions of the state. A surfer smiled happily from a wave on Santa Monica Beach. A movie director barked orders through a megaphone in Hollywood. A beautiful starlet sunned herself poolside in Beverly Hills. And there in Orange County, Mickey Mouse waved invitingly from the main street of Disneyland. I stared at the map, giddy with excitement. "I'm moving to cartoon land!" I thought. "This has got to be the most wonderful place ever. I'm gonna be the happiest boy in the world!"

When we arrived in California, the reality turned out to be a tad different. The coastal community of Newport Beach was certainly beautiful; the air was warm and scented by the Pacific Ocean. But instead of surfers and starlets, little Joe Francis got nuns. Mom and Dad decided I would enjoy the structure of Catholic School, and I was delivered into the hands of the sisters of Our Lady Queen of Angels. It wasn't a good fit. From the start I questioned everything the Catholic Church told me. "Why? How do you know? Prove it!" It drove the nuns crazy. Once again, I found the school day filled with mindless rote instruction that was neither challenging nor interesting to me. I constantly looked for other ways to amuse myself. As a result I got in trouble practically every day and eventually got tossed out of Catholic school altogether, for an incident I'll have to tell in detail some other time. Suffice to say the nuns were horrified, pushed me out the door and told me to never come back.

A series of such incidents finally convinced my parents that I wasn't getting the proper guidance at home. They

hatched the brilliant idea of shuffling me off to a boarding school to be raised by trained professionals. When I balked at the idea, they showed me a brochure of Rumsey Hall in New England and said, "Let's just go look at it. You can decide later." We flew to Connecticut and took a quick tour of the school. Before the tour was over I made my decision, and that decision was "Hell no." I turned to head for the car when I noticed my parents pulling something from the trunk that I hadn't seen before. It was a child-sized suitcase. Dad handed me the bag, tousled my hair and said, "Goodbye, son! And good luck!" As they headed for the car, I laughed, waiting for them to turn back and admit that it was just a joke. When they started the car and drove away, I was impressed with how far they were willing to take their little jest, until I heard the sound of their rental car fade into the distance and disappear altogether. The student director, a gray-faced codger who smelled like mothballs, put a fat hand on my back and pushed me into the building and down the hall to my room, where I sat down and cried for three days.

Rumsey Hall is a leafy campus of white clapboard buildings that must look adorably quaint to parents needing a place to store their children for a year, but for me it was a cold, damp, and irredeemably dull gulag. After all, I had never agreed to this! Connecticut? What about that map with the cartoon characters and the surfer and the starlet? What about California? That's what I signed up for!

The only time I took interest in anything at Rumsey Hall was when I discovered that you could sneak through a certain forest and up a hill to reach the girls' side of school. Every day I would escape from class or from the playground and steal through the woods to talk to the girls. Not because I was looking for action as a 10-year-old, but because sneaking to the girls' school was forbidden, and that alone made it irresistible.

During the school year I was allowed occasional trips back to California. At the end of these visits, my parents would hand me cab fare for the 50-mile ride to LAX, where I'd board a plane, connect through Chicago, fly to New York and wait for a cab to take me to school – all of this at age ten. Alone. For some reason, this didn't seem unreasonable to me. What did seem unreasonable was going to a boys' school in the middle of nowhere. I did everything I could to coax the authorities into kicking me out of Rumsey. Even as I write this, I shake my head and laugh out loud at some of the crap I pulled. It took me almost the entire year, but I finally racked up enough penalties to be shown the gate for good, and I happily flew home to California.

Back in Newport Beach, I had hardly unpacked my bag when my parents announced that I needed even more discipline. They escorted me to a boarding school near San Diego, somehow forgetting to mention until the moment we pulled onto campus that it was a military academy. The first thought that came to me upon climbing out of the car and getting a good look at this faux army compound was, "You've got to be kidding me." Once again, Mom and Dad jumped into the car and sped away, leaving me alone at the school's doorstep before I could launch a screaming protest.

There is a certain kind of kid who actually enjoys military school. I hope I never meet that kid. For me, the academy was a preposterous and intolerable collection of arbitrary rules and silly, quasi-military posturing. I couldn't take it seriously for a second. When we were rudely awakened at 4 a.m. and ordered out of our bunks, I turned over and said, "Forget it." When a dorm sergeant took a brass belt buckle I'd just polished, spit on it, handed it back to me and said, "Do it again," I tossed the buckle back to him and said, "I already polished it. You want it polished again, do it yourself." I was grabbed by the neck and marched to the school "commandant" for a disciplinary meeting. The commandant ordered me to stand at attention. I didn't hear him; I was staring at the ribbons on his chest. "Something wrong, boy?" He asked. I shrugged. "I'm just wondering what all those little ribbons are for. You've never been in the actual military, so what are those? Pretend ribbons?"

The commandant stared at me for a long beat. I smiled back. He turned in his chair and picked up the phone. He dialed my parents. Without taking his eyes off me, he told them that their son had just set a new school record. "No one had ever been kicked out of this academy in just five days," he said, scowling in my direction. My response was to slip my hands into my pockets, slouch even further, and give him back the biggest shit-eating grin I could muster.

Back home, I had three sisters (Babette, two years older; Caroline, a year and a half younger; and Christina, 10 years younger), who could get away with so much shit that it astonished me. "Joe did it!" was their boiler-plate alibi, and my parents fell for it every time. To spare myself the useless aggravation of having my denials fall on deaf ears, I would just cop to everything. Maybe it's because I respected the genius with which my sisters could make my parents believe anything. All I could do was shrug haplessly. "Yeah. I did it. So what?"

Off to reform school, that's what. This time, it was a harsh and desolate ranch-based facility surrounded by ancient forests in Northern California that was called, I think, Pine Valley. The school director took delight in constantly reminding us, "This isn't a prison. There are no walls." He'd sweep a hand generously toward the dark tree line. "You can walk out of here anytime you want. But it's only fair to warn you that you won't get far in those mountains before you're snatched up by a lonely logger or deranged hippie." "Snatched up for what?" I asked the older boys. "Anal rape," some of them hissed back, drawing the words out with demented relish. I didn't know what it meant at the time, but I knew I wanted no part of it.

I have just three memories of Pine Valley or whatever that goddamn place was called, but they'll haunt me forever. First, one of the teachers decided it would be a good idea to have us kids watch a pair of horses mate. We stood staring, the smallest of us desperately confused about what the hell we were supposed to make of it. The teacher grabbed the stallion's monstrous penis and inserted it into the mare. "That's the way it's done, fellas," the teacher said wistfully. On another rainy afternoon, we were treated to the spectacle of a horse being castrated with a pair of pliers. Finally, one morning a farmer woke us from a comfortable sleep and marched two other boys and me to a pasture containing a flock of sheep. He pointed to a one animal and asked, "What do you think of that fella there?" I yawned and said, "Looks like any other sheep." That's when I noticed the farmer had a rifle with him. He raised the gun and -- BLAM! -- shot the sheep through the head. He ordered us carry the carcass back to the barn. What lesson we were meant to draw from this spectacle I still can't tell you. The lesson I actually did learn is that people who have authority over you are not to be trusted.

I was the youngest boy at the reformatory, and probably the loneliest. I kept myself busy cleaning chicken coops and stacking firewood until I was too tired to do anything but fall into bed. I sure as hell wasn't going to venture anywhere near that forest full of anal rapists, so I kept my nose clean. By the end of the year, my parents decided I was properly reformed, so I was allowed to return home and enter public school.

HIGH SCHOOL

Junior High school was a blur. As soon as I was old enough, I got a work permit and found my first job, serving ice cream and sweeping floors for \$3.35 an hour at Gelato Classico. I can't tell you why, but I have always loved work. I would always rather be working than not. I spent all day at school just staring at the clock, waiting until I could run to the bus stop and get back to my job. I was thrilled to be making my own money. Not because I was anxious to buy anything, but because I wanted to eliminate any chance of ever being poor. I had watched my dad worry about money his whole life, and I was determined not to have my own life defined by constant financial insecurity. So I worked hard and saved.

I don't have many fond memories of Laguna Beach High. It was a pleasant enough place, but I couldn't stay engaged by high school culture. I certainly wasn't much of a player, thanks to a mouthful of what felt like the most outlandishly huge set of braces ever wired into a poor kid's face.

I was more interested in my after-school jobs. Whenever I found one that earned more money, I traded up. Eventually, I landed at a computer/video store where I learned to fix computers and sell video rental memberships. I discovered that I had an affinity for sales. I love talking to people and enjoy helping them invest in something I know they will be happy with. Sales allowed me to earn enough to buy my first car, an \$800 Audi that I tricked it out with plastic rims and a cheap green paint job. It wasn't the kind of car that was going to get me laid, but it represented something that I've grown to cherish more than just about anything else in life: freedom.

For me, high school was something to be endured until I could finally get into the world and make my own way. I didn't attend my prom; I wasn't voted "most likely to succeed" (or most likely anything else). I just worked, saved, stared balefully at the girls who wanted nothing to do with me and made sure my grades were good enough to get into a decent college. As a result, I was accepted into the only college I really wanted to attend. And my life was about to change forever.

USC

I chose the University of Southern California because I wanted to stay in L.A. and because it had a famous Entrepreneur Program, which promised to provide young students with the skills necessary to become successful businesspeople. I'd long since decided that I wanted to run my own business as an adult. I had always been impressed with the fact that my father was never anyone's employee. While he wasn't always as successful as he

wanted to be, he was his own boss. That appealed to me and, frankly, I started to think to myself, "Hell, I can do this." I loved the business classes at USC. I poured myself into study, fascinated with the complexities and challenges of business. I found that I had a genuine aptitude for it like nothing else. As a sideline, I took endless courses in film and television, having gained a lasting affection for making movies when I appropriated my father's super 8mm film camera as a child.

College was a revelation for me. My braces were off, I had my own apartment and I finally had a few dollars in my pocket. I was ready to explore life, and meet new people. The first thing I discovered in college is the value of friendship. I made great friends there. Greg Suess was a year older than me and took me under his wing to teach me the proper way to get laid in college. His system was based on the idea that a college girl won't sleep with you until three weeks after your first date. "What you do," he said, "is date a girl on a Wednesday, then date a second girl the next Wednesday, and a third girl the following Wednesday. The third girl won't put out, but that's when you call the first girl. She'll be wondering why she hasn't heard from you in three weeks and – BAM! – you're in. Keep this program going, and every week you'll have a new girl ready to sleep with you." Greg's advice held me in good stead through college. He owns a large entertainment company now and we do business together regularly (Greg was recently married, may he rest in peace). Perhaps my best friend at the time was a guy named Mark Rousso. Mark and I hit it off immediately because he liked women as much as I did. Together we invented some pretty novel (and frankly embarrassing) ways to meet women. Stories to fill a book! Today Mark's a very successful talent manager and remains one of my closest friends. Another friend at school was Chandler Robbins, a talented film student who now works as postproduction supervisor at *Girls Gone Wild*.

I made a second great discovery during college that was to have a huge impact on my life: Spring Break. In my freshman year I went to San Phillippe, Mexico, where I saw my first wet T-shirt contest. It was the most stimulating thing I'd ever seen in my life, and it made me a changed man. The first thing this changed man wanted to do was ... see another wet T-shirt contest. I had never imagined college girls could be so wild. The whole Spring Break experience was infused with a sense of fun and freedom that I found absolutely exhilarating. And more to the point, it was infused with naked breasts! They were everywhere! And what man doesn't love breasts? Tan, firm, real, 19-year-old breasts? Frankly, I went more than a little crazy that Spring Break. (More stories to save for another time.) I realized then and there that there isn't anything I appreciate more in the whole world than girls. Especially when they're naked. If only there was a way to turn this obsession into a career. ...

Later in the school year, my roommates and I took a study break, piled into a car one night and drove to a strip club in Hollywood. Breasts again. But as the girls danced naked for us, I wasn't content just sitting there staring, like my friends. So I boldly approached a couple of dancers, made some small talk and invited them back to our apartment after work. On the drive home, I told my roommates I couldn't wait for the strippers to arrive. They burst into laughter. "What's so funny?" I asked. They laughed even harder. Bobby, who was a player on the Trojan football team, said, "If those girls actually show up, I will get down on my knees and personally lick your asshole." I felt like an idiot. But two hours later, when we were heading for bed, the doorbell rang. I opened the door, and the two girls I talked to at the club stepped into the apartment. Strippers! In our apartment! My roommates were agape. I took the cutest one to my room to "show her the fish view." Those roommates never laughed at me again (and for the record, I declined the promised asshole-licking).

As part of the USC Entrepreneur Program, and as a condition for completing it, each student has to develop a viable business plan. This means selecting a product or service and putting together a complete strategy for its successful marketing. Over the years, I watched my father launch one business after another, with varying results. His most recent venture was a cosmetics line marketed under a name I gave him, "University Medical Products." His flagship product was a thigh cream sold through direct marketing. Direct marketing means taking your pitch directly to consumers through TV, newspapers or the mail (and today, the internet), rather than wholesaling to retailers who then sell to the public. After studying my father's business, I put together a plan designed to market a series of instructional videotapes called "Secrets of Successful Gambling." I was pretty proud of it. I thought it was a foolproof plan. But my professors were not impressed. I got a C, but it didn't bother me because I considered the source. These were teachers, I thought to myself, not businessmen. If they had any real talent for making money they'd actually be out in the world doing it. I graduated from USC in 1995 and couldn't wait to put it behind me. The only part of college I wasn't anxious to leave forever was the chicks.

I had hoped to put my business plan into practice after graduating, but I couldn't raise enough money to actually produce the gambling tapes. I tried working for my father, but quickly discovered that there wasn't room for two ambitious entrepreneurs in his office. Besides, I knew I would never succeed to the level I aspired to by working for him, so I struck out on my own. Hoping to tap the skills I had developed in film and TV classes, I went to work in television production. At first, all I produced was coffee and bagels for the office. The closest I got to a camera

was when I had to walk past one on my way to the parking lot to make some producer's dry cleaning run.

I moved from job to job in Hollywood, constantly seeking better opportunities. In time I landed a \$335-per-week production assistant gig at "Real TV," a syndicated TV show that featured footage from various sources of extraordinary events not covered in mainstream news. Working in the studio, I heard of a compilation tape the show's staff members passed around to each other. The tape contained footage too disturbing for broadcast TV. Things like animal attacks, accidents and executions. It was wildly popular around the production office, and I was fascinated by the fact that something so popular had no apparent value to the TV show I was working on, since it couldn't be aired on TV. I remember thinking, "If there was a way to get this material to the public, they would eat it up." Recalling the direct marketing plan I developed in school, it hit me like a brick to the head: Maybe this is the product that could make my plan work! I thought about it for a while, talked to some friends (who all thought I was nuts) and decided to take a chance. I drew cash advances on my credit cards and licensed the sensational footage – meaning, I paid the sources of the tape for the right to use it. Together with Richard Crystal (brother of Billy Crystal), we wrote, produced and edited a tape that included professional narration and music. All I needed was a title. The first name that popped into my head was as simple as it was effective, and gave me a product I knew I could sell: "Banned from Television."

BANNED FROM TELEVISION

I quit my production assistant job, put together an eye-catching commercial and purchased the only airtime I could afford, on late-night TV. I waited anxiously to see if we'd get a nibble. For days, I waited. For weeks, nothing happened. I spent many sleepless nights sweating into my pillow, wondering if I had just made the stupidest mistake of my life. For days I waited. Weeks. "Banned From Television" was not an immediate success. A few orders trickled in, but nothing worth celebrating. I'd made friends with the owner of Hollywood Center Studios, where "Real TV" was shot. He graciously loaned me a small office with a desk and telephone to use as my "company headquarters." Having an office on the studio lot allowed me to feel like an actual businessman, but the fact was I had no job and no income. I was eating at Kenny Rogers Roasters every day because I could get a filling lunch for \$3.35, and growing increasingly anxious that I might actually have to go to my father and beg for my job back.

In time, though, orders from the TV commercials began to pick up enough that I cautiously started to believe my plan might work. I splurged on what I thought was my first extravagance: an office fax machine. It felt like a huge deal to spend \$185 at Staples, but it also gave me the sense that I was, finally, a genuine businessman. It's funny, but even today when I come across an expenditure for a fax machine in my company's reports, it still feels like a big deal – despite the fact that I have offices in five locations and probably own at least 40 fax machines.

During the fall of 1997, we watched as orders for "Banned From Television" rose steadily from a few per day to dozens, then hundreds. Success! I hired eight new employees, and in 1998 I celebrated our growing success with my first true indulgence: a black convertible Porsche 911. I was still sharing a rented condo with two other guys and subsisting on fast food, but at least I could feel good pulling up to the drive-through window in my new car.

As "Banned From Television" became successful, I experienced something new in my life: Envy. Not mine, but the envy of others. Anything I've ever acquired in life, I've been happy to share with my friends. I don't want them to be envious of me. It's only the envy of people I've never met that has ever caused me any grief. An employee at "Real TV" that I had never spoken with noticed the money we were making and declared that he originated the idea for marketing the same video footage. He filed a lawsuit demanding that I share my profits. Never having been sued before, I naively assumed, because I had done nothing wrong, that I had nothing to worry about. Instead of retaining an experienced lawyer, I hired a friend who had just graduated from law school. My friend didn't know what he was doing. The judge barred me from putting on a defense due to legal technicalities. Though I expected the truth to prevail, the jury found for the other party in the amount of \$3.5 million dollars. I was astounded. I was able to negotiate the amount down to a fraction of that, but I learned an important lesson: You don't have to be guilty of anything to get royally screwed by the legal system. The problem is, the legal system is a game, and it is manipulated by lawyers, judges, and savvy, but unethical, plaintiffs. It's a big racket, and if you don't know what you're doing going in, you can get steamrolled. I've learned that the truth does not always come out, and it does not always prevail.

I put this troubling episode behind me and focused on growing our business. It wasn't always easy. In fact, it was a constant challenge. The reason they give you so much math in business school is to train your brain to solve problems. In business, you are faced with problems day by day, hour by hour. If you can't get comfortable with the idea of solving problems – in fact, if you can't learn to actually enjoy such an environment -- you will never succeed.

We produced additional volumes of "Banned From Television" and the company grew into a full-scale operation. I should have been happy, but the fact is, I wasn't satisfied with the product. To be honest, I had difficulty watching one of our tapes all the way through. As sensational as the material was, a lot of it was just plain disturbing. It's not the kind of video you're going to watch again and again. I began to look for another kind of tape I could

market. Something just as fascinating, but more ... I don't know, pleasant. Something other guys like me would enjoy watching over and over. The problem was, I had no idea what that might be.

GIRLS GONE WILD

I asked the sources providing me with sensational video clips whether they had any material for "Banned From Television" that was just as compelling, but not so violent. Something containing sex, for example. One source sent me footage of a group of Spring Break revelers getting arrested for public nudity at Lake Havasu. The arrest scene wasn't especially compelling, but as I was reviewing the footage one night in the office, the phone rang. As I took the call, the VHS tape continued to play past the arrest scene, eventually revealing other scenes on the tape that the source hadn't meant to send me. These scenes featured quick shots of college girls flashing their breasts during Spring Break and Mardi Gras. I immediately sat up in my chair. Breasts! I made some excuse to get off the phone, then rewound the tape and played it again. And again. I was transfixed. This wasn't porn; it was something better. It was real girls. It was spontaneous. It was awesome! And the girls were hot. I took the tape home, and for a few weeks, it was my only source of entertainment. I just couldn't get over it. I became convinced that other guys would be just as turned on by it as I was. So I licensed the footage, asked the source for more, and cut together a tape that contained nothing but cute, real college girls flashing their breasts.

After a solo brainstorming session during which I considered and rejected hundreds of names, I settled on the title "College Girls Gone Wild." I stared at the words for a long time, then reflexively crossed out "college" and circled "Girls Gone Wild." That was it! My brand! It had a perfect, inexplicable ring to it. I offered a graphic designer \$150 to help me design an eye-catching logo in red and yellow, like Kodak, or McDonalds (later changed to just a more tasteful red and white). We packaged the tapes, produced a 60 second commercial and prepared to market our newest product. We were terribly excited, but that excitement was about to evaporate before our disbelieving eyes.

The "Girls Gone Wild" concept, as promising as I thought it was, almost died right out of the gate. Every TV station we approached with our commercial turned it down. No one had ever advertised a product containing nudity on TV before. I found it ironic that TV stations had no problem allowing us to advertise death, violence and horror, but cute young girls showing their breasts was somehow utterly unacceptable. Eventually, though, Howard Stern's late night show on the E! channel agreed to take a chance and run the ads. Initially, and for many months, the sales for "Banned From Television" outpaced "Girls Gone Wild," simply because we could advertise it in more markets. But slowly, the new product caught on. College guys across the country started ordering the tape and sharing it with their buddies. Word of mouth spread, and Girls Gone Wild grew into a modest hit.

Eventually, I persuaded more stations to carry our commercial, and sales started to grow. I needed more footage, but instead of licensing more from the same source, I decided it would be more economical (and certainly a lot more fun) to produce my own. I purchased a professional video camera and headed off to Spring Break. It didn't take me long to discover that I loved asking girls to show me their breasts. And I was good at it! Growing up with three sisters, I had always been comfortable around girls, and found it easy to talk to them. Most girls said "no" to my request for a flash, but plenty said "yes." In fact, we had girls chasing us down for the chance to show us their breasts. As it turns out, girls love attention. Who knew? Flashing for the camera is a kind of release for them: An expression of freedom, a statement of independence and, frankly, a matter of pride. After all, I didn't invent the phrase, "If you got it, flaunt it." And it seemed the hotter the girl, the more willing she was to show me just how beautiful her body was. I had invented the Greatest Job in the World.

Sales of "Girls Gone Wild" continued to climb, and within a year I decided to expand my advertising from a 60-second commercial to a complete half hour of paid programming, a format known today as the infomercial. Typically, an infomercial will spend a full 30 minutes pitching a product, whether it's a slicer/dicer or spray-on hair, by identifying a problem in your life and then explaining how that product will solve it. I took a different approach. Instead of offering to solve a problem, we simply presented a product that allowed viewers to experience a great lifestyle. I designed our programming to resemble a TV show, interspersed with commercials for the product. This blending of commercials and entertainment was an entirely new concept, which I called the "entermercial." And all over America, college guys started staying up late just to watch the "Girls Gone Wild" entermercial ... over and over. We soon heard from surprised TV stations and cable networks that told us that the entermercial was actually beating their lead-ins (the shows that aired just before our paid programming). It was the first time any of them had heard of a TV commercial scoring higher ratings than a TV show.

Initially, when we went out to gather footage, we took our cue from Mardi Gras and offered beads to girls in exchange for flashes. The beads were a simple gimmick that allowed girls to feel (or at least to explain to others) that they actually got something in return for showing their breasts. It somehow sounded more acceptable to say,

"I flashed for some beads" than to say, "I flashed for no reason." But I wanted something unique to offer the girls. When my then-assistant Lauren Friedman suggested tank top T-shirts, I immediately recognized the brilliance of her idea. First, distributing shirts imprinted with our logo was a perfect way to promote the brand. Second, girls really seemed to appreciate receiving an actual article of clothing instead of a cheap strand of beads. But the best part of this concept is that it was necessary for the girls to remove their own shirts in order to put on our shirts. Genius!

The success of "Girls Gone Wild" brought me several interesting opportunities. The first was an introduction to Jackie Kahane. Jackie was an old veteran stand-up comic best known for opening Elvis Presley's shows in Las Vegas. I took an instant liking to him. He started hanging around the office, regaling us with stories of his old days in show business. My employees (none of whom were older than 24) and I enjoyed his company, and felt that he lent a needed touch of maturity to the place. Eventually I gave him a desk and phone of his own, and he'd spend his days cooking up deals for me, most of which were entirely outlandish. But one deal sounded intriguing. He thought I could use my marketing acumen to sell tapes of his friend Milton Berle's classic '50s variety TV show. Jackie invited me to regular lunches at the Friars Club in Beverly Hills (a private club of old-school comedians) and introduced me to legends like Milton Berle, Red Buttons and Sammy Shore. Berle had a complete library of his show in the form of kinescopes (a process used before the age of video recording, whereby a movie camera is pointed at a TV monitor to record the show on film as it's broadcast live), which I was to convert to VHS for the home video market.

Meeting these guys was a remarkable experience for a 24-year-old kid. I remember the first thing Berle said when we met was "Have ya heard about my dick?" I was afraid he was going to whip it out right there in the club and show me. Luckily, he didn't. Berle remarked over lunch that he couldn't understand the coverage that Monica Lewinsky was getting in the press at the time. "What's the big deal? Hell, Jack (Kennedy) and I had all kinds of girls in the White House," he laughed. Berle taught me how to smoke my first cigar (a Cuban, direct from his friend Fidel, he said). We never finalized the deal because it was so difficult to negotiate with Berle's lawyer, who was probably 95 years old at the time and totally deaf. There were also some issues with clearing rights to the musical acts on the Milton Berle show for the simple reason that most of them had long since died. But I wouldn't trade those Friar's Club meetings for anything. I loved talking to those guys, because I've always had a lot of respect for my elders. You can learn a great deal from almost anyone who's lived a long life, if you just take the time to listen.

Around the same time, I was surprised to get a call from Playboy inviting me to become a business partner. Impressed with the success I had in marketing the Girls Gone Wild tapes, they wanted to know if I could perform similar magic for Playboy. I met with Playboy President Jim English, who asked me to help create some revenue for Playboy. We developed two products: "Playboy Mansion Parties: Uncensored" and "Playboy's Casting Calls." My idea was to take the library of videos that Hugh Hefner had his staff record of the mansion parties over the years and cut them together with newer footage that we shot ourselves. I wrote and produced several 60-second commercials advertising the tapes, which almost immediately returned a profit. Playboy was delighted. The day after our commercials began to air I met Hef at a nightclub. He was cordial enough, but didn't even mention the product I'd just created for his company. The funny thing is, English had told me he had a two-hour conversation with Hef that very morning about me and the tapes I'd produced for Playboy. Years later I met with his daughter Christie, who is the CEO of Playboy. She recalled how, five years earlier, her father called her one day, happy with the news that I had just delivered a substantial first check to him for videotapes we produced. Hef had been struggling to fend off his company's pleas for him to divest himself of the Playboy Mansion, which was costing the company a few million dollars a year to run. "See?" he told Christie, "I told you the mansion had value!" Why Hef never expressed this appreciation to me himself, I'm not sure. Though I had always tried to avoid such comparisons, the press at the time started calling me "the new Hefner." Perhaps the phrase rubbed him the wrong way. In any case, I regret that Hef and I never did establish a close friendship.

SNOOP

A mutual friend introduced me to Snoop Dogg in 2000. I was thrilled to learn that Snoop was a fan of the "Girls Gone Wild" videos. Snoop is a remarkably sharp businessman, and had an immediate appreciation for what I had accomplished with my company. He invited me to his house one day. I remember arriving in the driveway to see four or five big guys come out of nowhere to ask me who the hell I was. But Snoop was smiling on the porch and invited me inside. He took me upstairs to his bonus room, where we sank into a couple of beanbag chairs and spent the rest of the afternoon in a smoky haze, laughing like idiots at old episodes of "Good Times" on video. Over the course of that afternoon we made plans for Snoop to appear in a Girls Gone Wild video and host an infomercial. I remember being driven back to the city with not only a sweet deal, but also a sudden, overwhelming case of the munchies. I must have stopped at every fast food place on the way, and it took me four hours to make it home, just 35 miles away.

Snoop and I went on a wild tour of Mardi Gras and Spring Break together, and had a blast. In fact, we continued traveling after we'd shot enough material for the show, just because we were enjoying ourselves so much. Among other places, we went to Brazil, where Snoop asked me to appear in the video for his "Beautiful" track with Pharrel Williams. Snoop is a good guy, great fun to hang with, and we stirred up some shit, I can tell you. Too many

stories about those wild trips to recount here, but “Girls Gone Wild: Doggy Style” remains one of the most popular titles in our company’s history. Snoop is a good friend and we both look forward to working together again soon.

THE BUS

When the “Doggy Style” infomercial hit the airwaves, we received tons of offers from other celebrities who wanted to align themselves with the Girls Gone Wild brand. We signed a deal to tour with Eminem, who was at that time the hottest rapper in the world. For the tour, we rented a million-dollar bus and decked it out with the Girls Gone Wild logo. It became a rolling billboard, and created a lot of attention for the brand. Everywhere we went people were fascinated with the Girls Gone Wild bus. They’d chase us down the street, begging for a peek inside. It convinced me to purchase my own tour bus as a movable “home base” for the Girls Gone Wild crews. We own two luxury tour buses now, and they travel the country year ‘round.

Eminem and I had fun on the road, but we didn’t enjoy the same chemistry that I had with Snoop. For one thing, because I’m 6’2” and Eminem can’t be more than 5’3,” we made an awkward pair on camera, and I think it made him feel insecure. Just as we finished editing the show together, Eminem’s movie “Eight Mile” came out to unexpectedly good reviews. I think he imagined he was going to be the next Brad Pitt, so he asked us to scrap the Girls Gone Wild project. Tales from that tour that are as insane as anything you’ve ever heard; someday I’ll share them with the public.

HOLLYWOOD

By 2000 I was making a solid living with Girls Gone Wild. I moved from my rented condo and into the L’Ermitage hotel, a leafy hideout in Beverly Hills. It’s a beautiful urban retreat and an awesome place to take girls. My adventures there deserve their own chapter, but the hotel staff began to gossip a little too loudly about the constant stream of girls I was entertaining, and I finally had to buy a house of my own.

With a little more money to spend, I started treating myself to the better restaurants and clubs of L.A. I made a lot of new friends, and found myself moving in circles that included a lot of young actors and actresses who were starting to become successful just as I was. I suddenly found myself dating some of the hottest girls in town (in Hollywood, that’s saying a lot), and even a few celebrities. I remember being in bed with Tara Reid one night when she asked “How does it feel to have sex with an A-list movie star?” I laughed and thought to myself, “How did she hear about that?” Reading this back, I realize that despite the fact I’ve been told, “This is the kind of stuff people want to hear about,” it’s impossible to tell too many of these stories without sounding like a boastful ass, so I’ll stop right here. Believe me, I’m as amazed as anyone at the opportunities that have come my way, and I tell you honestly, I am deeply grateful for all of it.

As my public profile grew, I began to come under increasing and intense scrutiny, and even judgment, by the press. It seems that people who’ve never even met me quickly decide they either love me or hate me. As a USC graduate who was just trying to build a business, I never expected to become such a polarizing figure. I truly believe it’s happened because society hasn’t entirely adjusted to me or what my company represents. It’s the trailblazers in society who always absorb the sharpest volley of slings and arrows. I’m not a professional athlete, musician or actor, and I never set out to become a public figure. I am one of only three people in the history of the world who have become known for building a successful business based on naked girls, and I’m not the first to be persecuted (or prosecuted) for it. In the early days of Playboy, Hugh Hefner went through the same thing: pilloried as a “smut peddler” and mocked for his unbridled enjoyment of life. He had to suffer a lot of false accusations, and in 1963 was even arrested and jailed on obscenity charges for publishing photographs of a nude Jayne Mansfield. But Hef as a public figure grew into an institution and became a hero to many for his stand on first amendment rights. Years later, Hustler publisher Larry Flynt suffered even harsher attacks, and at one point was sentenced to 25 years in prison for publishing pictures of naked girls. Flynt was shot for exercising his First Amendment rights. Today, Flynt is accepted (if not always respected) by the mainstream as a successful businessman who continues to champion our civil right to freedom of expression.

Personally, I never understood the furor over nudity. I grew up with a European mother, who dragged me as a child through endless museums containing paintings and sculptures of nude women, as well as beaches and public baths where nudity was absolutely no big deal. I suspect the wrath I draw from conservatives is based on the fact that Girls Gone Wild features real girls, not models or porn actresses. Perhaps this brings the issue “too close to home” for puritans who can’t accept that our videos feature girls who could be their daughters, sisters and girlfriends. Some people refuse to accept, despite all evidence to the contrary, that these girls actually seek out our cameras for a chance to celebrate themselves, and thoroughly enjoy their experience with “Girls Gone Wild.”

Far too many people refuse to accept that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with nudity! It’s the hypocrisy that amazes me: An unusually large part of our sales are shipped to the Bible Belt and other conservative areas of the country – to the same people who so publicly denounce the very idea of “Girls Gone Wild.” As I continue to face scrutiny and court action for exercising my First Amendment rights, I have to believe that society will eventually find a way to understand me and “Girls Gone Wild,” too. At least I hope so.

Everything I learned in business school and observed from my father contributed to the growth of "Girls Gone Wild." I was (and remain) constantly on the lookout for new ways to heighten the brand's profile and expand our product line. In every project I look for the potential of "scalability" – expanding it into something larger. I expanded our catalog of titles, opened new markets such as pay-per-view TV and video-on-demand, and hired a talented production staff to sharpen the look of our videos. But the core element of "Girls Gone Wild" has always remained the same: real college girls, real hot. By staying true to our original vision, we eventually achieved what most marketers can only dream of: brand ubiquity. A quick look at the "media" page on this web site will demonstrate that "Girls Gone Wild" -- especially the phrase "gone wild" has undeniably become part of our cultural vernacular. Even USA Today affirmed Girls Gone Wild as one of the top 25 most important trends of the last quarter-century.

PARADISE FOUND

In 1998 I took a vacation in Punta Mita, a beautiful stretch of beach near Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. After a few return trips, I decided I'd found the perfect place for a Girls Gone Wild corporate retreat. We purchased acres of the most beautiful oceanfront property we could find, and I spent more than a year with my designers Martyn and Tripp, meticulously designing a resort compound featuring a main house, two guesthouses, three pools and lush tropical gardens. Construction took nearly five years. When it was completed in 2005, I named the estate Casa Aramara from the local Hichoul Indian name for "The Goddess of the Pacific Ocean." The house has been featured in several magazines and TV shows and is a centerpiece of the book *Casa Mexicana Style* by Tim Street-Porter. It remains one of my proudest achievements. Jennifer Aniston, Vince Vaughn, Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, Courtney Cox, Sheryl Crow, Quincy Jones, Farrah Fawcett, Kimberly Stewart, Mimi Rogers and many others have stayed there and sung its praises. The property also serves as retreat for company executives and a shooting location for our infomercials, making it a valuable asset to the company and an excellent investment, much like the Playboy Mansion.

As the "Girls Gone Wild" brand grew, the sophistication (some would say the outrageousness) of our infomercials grew, too. In 2004, we sent comedian Doug Stanhope on the road with Girls Gone Wild and he returned with hilarious footage. Doug pretended to have great difficulty getting girls to flash for the Girls Gone Wild cameras. At one point, he gestured at a girl's breasts and demanded, "Show us where babies feed!" This line became a popular catch phrase as a result of the infomercial and Doug reports (perhaps regrettably) that audience members still call it out to him wherever he goes.

Girls Gone Wild had gone from being a hit, to being a sensation, and by now was a national (and eventually worldwide) phenomenon. Imitators came and quickly faded away, as if to demonstrate that my company's success wasn't due to the idea, but to the way we executed that idea. Frankly, it's always bothered me when people congratulate me for having stumbled upon a great "idea," as if that's all it took to build a company. Hell, I have an "idea" to cure cancer, too – but that's not going to help anyone unless I figure out how to execute that "idea."

Regardless, success has its various prices, and in the case of Girls Gone Wild, we became a target for many archconservative elements that still believe, just like those teachers from my childhood, that there's something intrinsically wrong with celebrating the female form. In early 2003, I made several TV appearances announcing that Girls Gone Wild was planning a live Pay Per View event during spring break to be broadcast from South Padre Island, Texas, Panama City, Florida, and other locations. The mayor of Panama City, Lee Sullivan, a quintessential "Good ol' boy," publicly announced that we weren't welcome in his town and he would shut down the GGW event. The mayor and I squared off on Fox News Channel's Greta Van Susteren show, during which the mayor threatened me by saying that if I stepped foot in his town I would be arrested.

I countered this outrageous threat by filing a lawsuit against Sullivan, as well as the local Sheriff, the Chief of Police and the city of Panama City, asserting my first amendment right to visit Panama City and the right of Girls Gone Wild to videotape public events there during Spring Break. As a result, I won a restraining order against the city and its officials, and Panama City was forced to back down. I imagine the mayor and other officials were pretty embarrassed when local news channels aired footage of them getting served with legal papers. I also know for a fact that the city officials were enraged after having to back down as a result of my First Amendment lawsuit. But I had no idea that rage would lead to what became a destructive relentless and vengeful personal crusade against me. Just two weeks later, incredibly, I would find myself facing a potential 335 years in prison.

When we arrived in Panama City, I knew the local police and sheriffs would be shadowing us. I wasn't worried because I knew we weren't going to do anything even remotely outside of the law. But while Girls Gone Wild was in Panama City, a couple of underage girls lied to a GGW cameraman about their ages to appear on Girls Gone Wild. Their parents notified the police, and that's all the city needed. The police stormed our rented condos, tearing the rooms apart and confiscating every piece of private property they could find. They arrested 10 of my crewmembers, and me, even though I had not been present for the videotaping (or even knew it had happened) and hadn't even met the girls till later. Even though I wasn't involved in the filming of the girls, the state attorney claimed that I bore responsibility anyway, because I own Girls Gone Wild (though this was really about revenge). I

was hit with a staggering list of 71 bogus felony charges that added up to 335 years in prison. The city impounded my recently purchased Gulfstream jet, confiscated my car and accused me of everything from drug trafficking to racketeering. This was all clearly in retaliation for my having filed and won that First Amendment lawsuit! The city was just trying to distract the conversation away from my lawsuit by attempting to criminalize me. It was totally ridiculous. I strongly denied the charges, all of which, except for four felonies were thrown out by Judge Dee Dee Costello. The judge determined that the police had lied on their arrest reports, lied on their search warrant applications, and in any case went totally overboard in their handling of the situation. The judge ordered the Sheriff to release my plane (which they claimed had carried illegal drugs, another total fabrication), but the case is still pending today, four years later. You can read about it in detail on the ["Legal Story"](#) of this web site. And the vendetta that Panama City started against me at the time did not end there. In fact, it got worse – much worse, as you will see later in this story. Needless to say, I expect to be fully exonerated, and I can promise you, I won't stop until my innocence has been established and Panama City Beach, Fla. apologizes to me for what the judge herself described as their extreme, absurd and unlawful actions.

LIGHTS! CAMERA! ACTION!

In 2004, IN DEMAND, a pay-per-view TV company, approached us and asked if we could produce an event to broadcast during the Superbowl Halftime. They were looking for something to go up against the incredibly lame "Lingerie Bowl" and thought we were just the company to do it. The "Girls Gone Wild Halftime Games" became our biggest production yet. We recruited college girls from all across the country to come to "Girls Gone Wild Island" (actually Casa Aramara) to participate in a series of naked games. We filled the beach with colorful game apparatus, cast a couple of midgets to referee and had an absolute blast, shooting for two days. I remember standing on the lawn of the main house, watching 40 naked girls run around the property as the sun glimmered off the Pacific, thinking, "Joe, you lucky son of a bitch, you have to admit, life is pretty good."

The following year, Girls Gone Wild produced an infomercial called "Ultimate Rush." The concept involved MTV comedian Zane Lamprey searching the world for the one wild experience that I (or at least my TV persona) had not experienced yet. For the shoot, we had some "Girls Gone Wild" surfboards made and brought 12 beautiful girls to the North Shore of Hawaii, where the locals welcomed us and invited me to surf the famous Banzai pipeline with them. Later, back in L.A., we shot a scene in which I drove a NASCAR car tricked out with the "Girls Gone Wild" logo around a NASCAR racetrack. It scared the shit out of me. It was a short half-mile course, meaning you're cranking the steering wheel the entire time, and the visibility in those cars is worse than a Bradley Fighting Vehicle. During lunch, though, I took my own Ferrari onto the track and got it up to 140. That was a hell of a lot more fun. I invited one of the girls we cast for the shoot to ride with me. If you want to get lucky with a girl, I can offer a very effective method: Take her around a racetrack at top speed in a Ferrari. You will close the deal, guaranteed.

In the final scene of the infomercial, Zane calls me on a videophone to find me aboard a spacecraft orbiting the earth with several hot girls. To shoot the scene, we traveled to Moscow, where a company aligned with the Russian space program offers customers the chance to experience zero-G conditions about a specially equipped airplane (similar to the "Vomit Comet" used to train NASA astronauts). We arrived on a snowy evening in winter, rented a hotel suite across the river from the Kremlin, and watched as 43 of Moscow's most beautiful models auditioned for the scene by taking their clothes off for us. Later, we explored the city, eventually escaping the bitter cold in a downtown casino, where I found myself playing Texas Hold 'em with a group of scary-looking Russian mafia guys. They grew even more scary-looking as I won hand after hand. I played until the sun came up – not because I was enjoying the game so much, but because I didn't want to walk back to my hotel in the dark after taking everything these guys brought to the table!

The shoot itself was another one of those unbelievable experiences. We built out the interior of an airplane to resemble a spaceship from "2001: A Space Odyssey." Four girls and I climbed aboard with a director and camera crew. We ascended high into the troposphere, where the pilot performed a series of parabolic arcs, which creates several seconds of zero-G condition inside the plane. It was better than any roller coaster ride, and I can probably state with certainty that I am the first person in history to experience weightlessness with four beautiful naked girls, though the enchanting wonder of the moment was slightly offset when the girls filled the plane with glistening, pungent droplets of floating vomit.

BROTHER

There is one person who deserves his own chapter in my story. When I moved into my current house in Bel Air, I got a call from my next-door neighbor inviting me over for a drink. The neighbor was legendary composer and producer Quincy Jones. Over the years, Quincy has come to represent every kind of human decency to me, and is the type of man I personally aspire to being. He is one of America's most accomplished individuals, and one of the world's truly great human beings. He's also one cool dude. The night I first went next door to visit him; I had an 18-year-old girl with me. When she told Quincy her age he said, "Hell, I've had hangovers older than you." We've traveled all over the world together, and it's invariably a great adventure. On the way to the VMA awards in Miami, we flew over Hurricane Katrina as it was gaining strength in the Gulf of Mexico. We went to Dubai to celebrate Quincy's birthday. In 2004, we were riding together on the way to a tribute for Quincy at the Apollo Theater in New

York when I got a phone call telling me that a woman from Texas had just accused me of rape. Quincy quickly forgot all about the tribute and spent the rest of the ride helping me get through the ordeal of absorbing this news. When I was arrested in Panama City this year, Quincy flew down the very next day to sit with my parents in court. He's like a big brother to me. He is one of the rare persons I know who is not afraid to hit me with hard truths about myself, which is something I've come to value greatly. Because he is grounded, self-actualized, and primarily focused on bringing good into the world, I consider Quincy one of the most amazing people I've ever met.

UPS AND DOWNS

The peak experiences of life have a way of balancing out with those events you would prefer never happen at all, and it's been no different for me, except perhaps by degree. During Spring Break 2004, I met a Texas college girl in South Beach, Miami. She approached me in a bar and flirtatiously picked a fight by telling me she didn't agree with the morality of "Girls Gone Wild." I patiently explained that I had neither invented breasts, nor men's appreciation of them. I told her that girls have been flashing long before I came along, and that they truly enjoy "going wild" for our cameras. We argued these points for a while, and she eventually backed off her opinion. In fact, she followed me back to my hotel suite, bringing a girlfriend along. She and I had a nice night in my bedroom while her friend crashed in the living room with my bodyguard Jason, who was an active-duty police officer. The following day, the girls looked around my Ritz Carlton room and asked how much it cost me to rent the Presidential Suite. When I told them, they glanced at each other, and I could almost hear the "ka-ching" sound of a cash register ringing in their heads. They ordered lunch from room service. When I told the girl I had to get back to work, it's possible that she felt I was blowing her off. The fact is, Spring Break is the busiest time of the year for me. In any event, she grudgingly gathered her clothes and headed out the door, but not before I made her return the expensive hotel bathrobe she tried to steal from the room. Later, when I was busy at work, I heard that this girl had gone to the police and cried "rape!" She told the police that I must have slipped something into her drink because she had no memory of the previous night. I was outraged. I have great respect for women and would never drug or force myself on a girl. To prove my innocence, I took three separate lie detector tests for the authorities and passed all three times. The girl submitted to a blood test, which revealed no drugs in her system. The Miami Beach Police Department and the state attorney did not find her story credible and refused to arrest me or file charges. But the press had already picked up the story and blared, "Joe Francis accused of rape." I went on TV that night and publicly challenged this girl who had recklessly tried to ruin my good name to take a lie detector test herself. She declined. I sued the woman for \$25,000,036.00 -- \$25 million for defamation, \$36 for the cheeseburgers that she and her friend had ordered from the Ritz Carlton's room service the afternoon after the alleged "rape." Un-f-ing-believable.

KIDNAPPED

Though I think life needs a certain amount of ups and downs to be interesting, I suppose you should be careful what you wish for. Easily one of the lowest moments of my life was the night that I knew, without a doubt, that I was about to die. On a winter evening in 2004, I came home from a nightclub and surprised an intruder who had broken into my house. As I walked through the front door, a stranger wearing a mask came up behind me and put a gun to my head. He tied my hands behind my back, pushed me onto the bed and forced me into a compromising position, all the time keeping the gun pressed against my skull. I was terrified. He produced a video camera, pointed it at me and ordered me to say, "I'm Joe Francis, and I love Boys Gone Wild." For over six hours, he made threats against my life as he ransacked my house. He stole my watch, a Picasso and several other valuables and then marched me into the garage. He forced me into the back of my car, drove out of my driveway and headed down the streets in the predawn darkness. As I struggled against the plastic ties around my wrists, I could not believe my life was going to end in this way. I furiously tried to think of a way out of the situation, but when the car pulled over and stopped, my heart sank. I was certain that the last thing I'd see was the flash of a gun as a bullet tore into my skull. Instead, my assailant warned me to not to move and drove away in another car. I finally managed to break free and call the police.

Within a day, I got a call from this scumbag, ordering me to pay him half a million dollars or he would release the videotape he made of me to the public. My response was, "Go fuck yourself." Nobody is going to extort a penny from me. He muttered some threats and hung up, but called again the following day. This time the police recorded the call, and several subsequent calls, but couldn't put together enough evidence to make an arrest. Amazingly, a short while later, my ex-girlfriend Paris Hilton happened to be at a party where she overheard someone bragging about this crime. She alerted the police and they arrested Darnell Riley, a Hollywood lowlife.

He pled guilty to robbery at gunpoint and attempted extortion and was sentenced to more than 10 years in prison. I later heard that Riley had served time for killing two Korean shopkeepers at point-blank range years earlier. It was then that I realized just how lucky I was to have come through the ordeal with my life.

MAGIC MOUNTAIN

In May 2006, I was about to turn 33. I felt I had accomplished quite a bit by this stage of my life, but the greatest (and only true) source of wealth I have acquired is the many friends and business contacts I have made over the

years. The company showed its appreciation and decided to celebrate by renting Southern California's Magic Mountain amusement park and throwing the biggest party anyone ever saw. I arrived at the park early, ready to have a great time. But as dusk gave way to evening, I began to grow a little heartsick. No one was showing up! We'd rented an entire amusement park and nobody was there to enjoy it. Was it because the park is a 45-mile drive from the city? I shrugged it off and decided, "What the hell! It's not going to stop me from having a good time." With my friend Mark Shapiro, the Six Flags CEO, I climbed aboard the park's biggest roller coaster. When we reached the top of Goliath, Mark pointed across the parking lot. "Look at that!" he said. He was pointing to the freeway, where the traffic was bumper to bumper. The exit to Magic Mountain was jammed, and hundreds of cars clogged the street from the freeway to the park's entrance in a glittering line of stream of headlights. They were coming after all!

On that warm California evening under a sky choked with stars, more than 5000 friends and business acquaintances arrived to be greeted by a smiling park staff. All of Hollywood was there. I was blown away. There's no way I had time to personally greet all the guests, but I made sure everyone had a blast. All the rides were running, there were four full bars and a dinner buffet, and the park's many restaurants and food stands served their offerings for free. There were no VIP areas or star treatment: Everybody enjoyed themselves like one enormous, happy family. Truly one of the great events of my life.

REPORTER GONE WILD

In 2006, I was at a party when I was approached by a reporter from the Los Angeles Times, who told me she wanted to profile my company for the newspaper's business section. The reporter called me daily for almost a month before I finally agreed to meet her for lunch. She asked why I was so reluctant to meet with her. I told her I didn't trust journalists because I'd had been screwed by reporters in the past. But she said readers would be interested in how I built a business from zero to \$100 million annually in just nine years, so I invited her to visit my Santa Monica office, our telephone call center and the Girls Gone Wild warehouse.

She seemed impressed with my company, and fascinated with me on a personal level. At one point, as I was explaining some aspect of my business to her, I saw something in her eyes that gave me a bit of a shock. Call me crazy (you wouldn't be the first), but I am rarely wrong about these things. As she leaned closer and stared into my eyes, I realized why she wasn't paying attention to my business story anymore. She was thinking about something else. I swear to God, she was falling in love. This was not good news for me because she was one of those women you feel kind of sorry for: Not at all attractive, and neither bright enough nor interesting enough to make up for it. When she told me she was required to write her newspaper stories at a 7th grade reading level, I remember thinking "How does she manage to write so far above her capacity?"

Looking back, I realize I should have picked up clues to her true agenda. I'm reminded of one of my favorite movies, "The Sixth Sense," in which unsuspecting audiences don't realize what's really going on until the last minute, compelling them to go back and carefully review the entire story again. I should have realized, by the nature of this reporter's questions and disingenuously flirtatious manner (which I refused to reciprocate) that she wasn't planning to write a dry business piece at all. But it never occurred to me. Instead, I decided to provide her with a fascinating perspective on the kind of culture that allows Girls Gone Wild to flourish by traveling into America's heartland to watch it in action. She happily accepted an invitation to accompany me on my private jet to Chicago. Along the way, the phrase "QWERTY keyboard" came up in our conversation. She asked what a QWERTY keyboard is. I was astonished. A journalist! Anyone who owns a keyboard can tell you that the standard American layout for the keys is known by the six letters that appear on the top left side of the keyboard. Q, W, E, R, T, Y. I playfully ripped on the reporter for not knowing this, and for not knowing the reason why the letters on the keyboard are arranged that way. I was quietly beginning to wonder if the Los Angeles Times had sent me one of their least qualified reporters. At the same time, I was creeped out by how infatuated she was with me. At one point, she tried to kiss me, but I backed away and said, only half-joking, "I don't hook up with fat girls."

In Chicago we joined the Girls Gone Wild tour bus at a club packed with hard-partying college students. The reporter spent much of the night in whispered conversations with other girls in the club. And if any of these girls came up to me, she would maneuver to fend them off, saying, as a jealous girlfriend might, "Why are you interested in Joe? You shouldn't like him." Later, I walked her outside to the bus where a local police officer was chatting amiably with my crew. When the reporter asked the cop a question, he told her she wasn't allowed to write his answer down on her notepad. She replied by putting her pad away. I was astonished. "Don't you think that's a violation of the First Amendment?" I asked her. "This officer doesn't think you have the right to report what he says!" She just shrugged. I told her I had been harassed in Florida for exercising my own right of free speech, and paid a serious consequence for it. "This is what they did to me," I said, gently pressing her against the police car in a playful demonstration of how the Florida police chilled my constitutional rights. The cop and my crew members saw what I was trying to explain and laughed at our horseplay, but the clueless reporter missed my point altogether. She turned on me with a strange look in her eyes. Perhaps I triggered some traumatic memory from her past because suddenly she wasn't smiling anymore. She stormed away, called for a cab and left. I never saw her again, but a few weeks later, her article came out in the Los Angeles Times, and it was a complete hatchet job. The funny thing about her piece is that any thinking person would find it hard to believe -- which it was, because

no person could be as bad as the fictional character she “profiled” in her story. The story’s accuracy ended with the spelling of my name. Worst of all, she accused me of raping a girl I’d met that night in Chicago (a supposed virgin who, it turns out, was a local stripper). Let me repeat that as a brother of three sisters and as a guy who has no trouble getting women, that I would never force myself on a girl.

It was eventually revealed by the police that the reporter, in an apparent effort to avoid facing a lawsuit by me for her baseless allegations, convinced this girl to actually file a rape report three months after the supposed incident. She told the girl that they could tour the TV talk shows together and the girl could become rich if she was willing to publicly accuse me of rape! The authorities wouldn’t go along with her scheme, because despite the reporter’s constant pressure to bring charges, their investigation revealed that no crime had been committed. What’s more, I expressed full willingness to undergo a lie detector test. Once again, I was never arrested or charged with any crime, but the press seemed gleeful at the opportunity to connect my name with the word “rape” in their headlines. Rape? Me? Un-f-ing-believable. I’ll tell you what I find particularly upsetting about these baseless charges, and the manner in which the press seems to enjoy reporting them. Every time some girl uses a bogus claim of rape to win money or publicity and is later proven to be an opportunistic liar, I’m sure it makes genuine victims of rape reluctant to come forward, fearful of being perceived the same way by a media whose very lifeblood seems to be scandal, and the more lurid, the better.

Most people who deal with the press learn that any reporter (especially a feature reporter) typically goes into a story with an angle already in place; the “reporting” then consists simply of looking for facts to fit in with the conclusions the reporter has already made. The Times reporter seemed determined from the beginning to paint me in as bad a light as possible. She apparently only interviewed people who might have something negative to say about me, and never talked to any of my friends or business associates – even though I’d provided her with the contact information for more than a hundred people.

The article was full of not just inaccuracies, but sneering judgments of my business, my character and even my looks. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, it became the second-most read article in the newspaper’s online history. Someday I’ll take the time to refute each one of her outrageous allegations, which should make a pretty compelling story in itself. But for now, her article remains a matter of public record, with no retraction or correction ever offered by the reporter or her newspaper.

BIGGER AND BETTER

In early 2007, I commissioned a complete line of high-quality “Girls Gone Wild” apparel. The designer I hired created three amazing collections, including casual wear, sleepwear, and with famed designer Ashley Paige, a line of spectacular swimwear. We held a runway fashion show during Mercedes Benz fashion week in South Beach and Ashley’s designs were an instant hit. I have high hopes for the collection. As I see it, the Girls Gone Wild clothing line helps expand the brand to an audience that wouldn’t normally order a DVD, but still wants to experience the Girls Gone Wild lifestyle. We have always been about inclusion. Girls Gone Wild is a lifestyle and an attitude that I want to share with others. What’s more, it’s my feeling that there is a “Girls Gone Wild” in every girl. That impulse toward fun, freedom, free expression and youthful exuberance. Our clothing line is 90 per cent tailored to women because let’s be honest, we all know women love attention. From what we hear, every girl who puts on a Girls Gone Wild shirt gets more comments and attention from men for that piece of clothing than from anything else she’s ever worn.

LOCKED UP

Back in 2003, when I was arrested after several women claimed that cameramen working for my company had filmed them when they were underage, I was given bail and spent only a few hours behind bars. I thought it would be the last time I’d ever see the inside of a jail cell, because I expected to prevail in that case (still do), and, more importantly, I’m not a criminal! I have been fighting those charges vigorously ever since 2003, expecting them to eventually be dismissed (still do), and the case still has not been tried. But the women in the case retained lawyers who decided to file a civil suit against my company and me, asking for millions of dollars, even though they had lied about their ages to get on camera for “Girls Gone Wild.” The judge in this civil suit is an ex-law partner of some of the lawyers who brought the suit. Though this is arguably a breach of jurisprudent ethics, the judge would not recuse (dismiss) himself from the case. Moreover, he actually ordered me to settle the lawsuit or go to jail. If this sounds implausible to you, read the [“Legal Story”](#) page of this web site, and be prepared to be outraged. My lawyers and I spent several days trying to work out the settlement in mediation talks with the women’s lawyers. In direct violation of the court-ordered confidentiality of these talks, one of the girls’ attorneys complained to the judge (his old law partner) about my negotiating style. In the mediation session, I promised that the lawyers would not be able to extort money from me for their clients’ lies. These guys were no better than the scumbag who’d broken into my house and tried to extort money from me with a gun to my head. Upon hearing the “colorful language” I used as part of this posturing, the judge in the case held me in contempt of court, and ordered me to jail – without citing any legal basis for doing so. Jailed for using colorful language in a confidential mediation? Legal scholars reviewing the case have expressed dismay at the possibly dangerous precedents set by the judge’s actions (see this story on the [legal story](#) page). As of this writing, I’m still in jail after several long months, without

having been convicted of anything. I've grown more and more outraged at the unbelievable injustice of this situation, as have all of my friends, dozens of journalists and the thousands and thousands of people who've learned the details of the case through this website or in the national media. The support of my friends and family, and even strangers who've written to me, has done a lot to help me deal with a pretty grim situation. I look forward to being vindicated.

Jail was an adventure in itself. The Sheriffs at the Washoe County Jail in Reno understood that I wasn't a criminal, and they treated me very well. You'll forgive me if I don't write in more detail about the experience at this moment. As I write this, I've only been out of jail a few weeks, and the last thing I want to do is recall the experience. The one positive thing about jail was that it gave me plenty of time to focus on the future.

Girls Gone Wild as a company is doing better than ever: By the end of 2007, Girls Gone Wild will have expanded into more than 15 countries around the world. This year, that number is expected to double. We've already discovered that "Girls Gone Wild" and the phrase "Gone Wild" have entered the vernacular of countries across the globe just as they have in the United States. We've got some great projects in development, including a chain of "Girls Gone Wild" restaurants, and the future looks very exciting.

And so my story arrives at present time, in 2008. But don't imagine that it's over. After all, I'm only 34! I have my whole life ahead of me, with ambition and ideas to spare. I hope and fully expect to accomplish great things, most of which I haven't even dreamed of yet. In fact, it doesn't embarrass me to tell you that I literally get chills when I consider the challenges and achievements I still have to look forward to. As this roller coaster ride prepares for yet another exhilarating climb, I can't say for sure what lies over the next hill, or around the next turn. Nobody can. But there's one thing I know for sure: It's going to be a hell of a ride.