

DYNAMIC DUO

A little too smart for his own good, Smarty Pants of Chicago, IL, USA, teamed up with his lovely wife, Miss Dena, to become a powerful force in the pursuit of amazing balloon entertainment.

Finding the Entertainer Within

Like many balloon artists, Smarty Pants picked up balloons on a whim. After filling in for a friend at a New York City restaurant gig and not knowing how to twist, he began learning the figures from "Captain Visual's Big Book of Balloon Art" for fun.

At first, Smarty offered a dog or sword when someone asked for a dinosaur or mermaid. Then, he'd practice the figures people had asked for. "I promised I could do it, then figured out how after the fact," he said. Luckily, Smarty found it was more important to be a funny entertainer than a great twister.

"People wanted a big personality more than a fancy balloon," he said. "Ninety percent of the job was showing up and helping people have a good time."

With a degree in environmental science and a minor in geology from Columbia University, Smarty worked weekdays at a geological observatory in Palisades, NJ, USA. But secretly, he waited for the weekends to make balloons at the restaurant. "I knew pretty



quickly geology was not going to work out for me," he said.

Discovering a Partner

Soon, Smarty was performing simple, standard magic shows with balloons afterwards, and found that people were getting more excited about the balloons.

After meeting Miss Dena through a mutual friend, Smarty saw their potential for working together. "When I needed props, I pestered her into making them for me. I said, 'If you make me a costume, I'll take you out for dinner.' You have enough dinners, and eventually, you're dating!" he said.

In 2001, when Dena went back to college, she and Smarty moved to Austin, TX, USA. Smarty took the chance to do balloons full time.

Creating "The Big Balloon Show"

Smarty knew people had specific expectations when it came to magic shows, but few knew what a balloon show should include. With "The Big Balloon Show," he incorporated all the great parts of a vaudeville show—a musical opener, comedy bits, dancing, magic, and goofy balloon animal skits.

"My only rule with 'The Big Balloon Show' was that I could do anything as long as it included balloons," he said.

Smarty pitched his show as a weekly feature at an indoor play facility. "They agreed to give me a shot and paid me next to nothing," he said. But, the chance to do a show every week and constantly come up with new ideas got Smarty's creative juices flowing and his business off the ground. In 2004, he won the title of Austin's Best Balloon Artist/Entertainer. "No one else was doing anything like this," he said.

By 2006, Miss Dena had graduated with a degree in industrial welding, and she and Smarty were ready to take their careers to Chicago.

Performing Together

After moving to Chicago, Smarty was ready to kick his balloon business into high gear, and Dena didn't yet know what she was going to do. Smarty spent the next three months begging her to work with him.

"I never, ever wanted to be on stage," said Dena. "I was always in the arts, but behind-the-scenes."

Smarty finally convinced Dena to join him and now they market themselves as a husband-and-wife team, hoping to bring back the fun and witty banter of historic comedy partners.

"Neither of us are trained stage performers," he said. "Fortunately, when you don't know the rules, you're not afraid to break them."

Becoming 'Smarty Pants'

Smarty has also created a unique identity, preferring to go by his stage name even when he's not performing.

'Smarty Pants' was a nickname he had as a kid, so it seemed a natural fit. Smarty's signature attire reflects how he normally dresses. Categorizing his clothing in a "vaudeville/retro style," Smarty acquired some outfits from his late grandfather. Then, while cleaning an office building in college, Smarty found a fez hat and started wearing it as a joke. "It looked like a weird party hat and fit me perfectly," he said. The fez soon became part of his "look."

Smarty and Dena's unique image leaves a lasting impression. "When people see us at a restaurant or library show or birthday party, they see a consistent look. It helps with our business overall."

Making Their Mark

Having a consistent image is one way Smarty and Dena set themselves apart. They also send out colorful brochures, targeted e-mails, and even DVDs to prospective clients.



Smarty Pants and Miss Dena enjoy building a show and making it come to life. "Balloons have such a magic draw, it makes our job so much easier," Smarty said.

"With the Internet and the ability to mail a DVD, it's much easier to explain what we do," Smarty said. "We often have to educate people about what a balloon show is."

They also follow up with past clients for referrals and use balloons in any way possible to bring attention to their business.

"I've been fortunate to have gotten some nice TV coverage," Smarty said. "People always respond well to marketing that shows off your TV appearances!"

Showing Their Stuff

Regardless of the venue or audience, the focus is always on entertaining. Smarty and Dena perform "The Big Balloon Show" at schools, community centers, and libraries.

Smarty also entertains at restaurants and birthday parties.

"We probably do the biggest high-end birthdays here," he said. "There are a lot of parents who book over-the-top parties, and we try to make it something they'll never forget. We're not the cheapest, but we're the best."

Striving To Be the Very Best

Smarty's commitment to excellence is what drives him to improve his skills and his show. "I'm never satisfied to say, 'OK, our show is done.' I'm my own worst critic and biggest motivator," he said.

He loves to make big, attention-grabbing pieces and Qualatex® 350Qs are his balloon of choice. "Anything you make with a 260Q you can make with a 350Q with a lot bigger impact," he said.

Smarty only trusts Qualatex balloons to withstand the rigors of his entertaining. "When we're doing props for a show, I can't risk having them break," he said.

Creating Memorable Experiences

Giving audiences the very best show is always the #1 goal. With the unlimited potential of balloons, Smarty and Dena enjoy building a show and making it come to life.

Another advantage to doing shows is the ability to reach groups of any size. "Whether I'm doing a show for one or 1,000 people, I'm helping to change their perception of what can be done with balloons," he said.

Enjoying Success Together

Neither Smarty nor Dena can imagine themselves doing anything else. "I don't think I'd quite enjoy this work as much if she wasn't an equal part of it," Smarty said.

Dena added, "My husband is my best friend and my creative partner, so working together is awesome."

Smarty said, "Hopefully, we'll continue to grow as professionals and performers and keep ourselves as entertained as we do the audiences." ©

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