

JAMES GREGORY EULOGY

By Lenny Sisselman

1. My name is Lenny Sisselman, I have been James' Manager for 27 years and friend for 42 years.

In 1981, I went to a pizza restaurant in mid-town Atlanta because they were having a "comedy night." They had it on Sunday nights in the basement. Live comedy shows outside of major cities like NY, LA, Chicago were almost non-existent at this time but I loved comedy so I would go every Sunday I could. I don't remember any of the acts back then except one "older" guy with a deep southern accent, large tongue, and unforgettable presence on stage. I don't even remember if he was funny, but he made an impact on me.

Not many months later in 1982, a full-time comedy club opened in Sandy Springs, The Punchline, which was literally less than a mile from where I was living at the time. I went there anytime I could and there was this same "older guy" doing comedy and now I realized he WAS very funny.

A few months later, that same year, after the Punchline opened, I became the manager at a new club down the street called The Comedy Spot. I met James and tried to get him to work at the Comedy Spot, but the owner of the club was not smart enough to book James. As luck would have it, the club didn't last very long.

A little over a year later in 1984, I moved to Nashville to run Zanies and the first call I made was to James. He ended up working at Zanies for 40 years and we developed a life-long friendship.

In 1997, I left Zanies and went into full-time personal management and James asked me to manage him. He said to me, "get me a record deal and get me out of these clubs, I want to start working theaters." So that's what we set out to do. Within a couple of years, we had his record deal with Sony and James started working theaters in small towns throughout the southeast. James felt that many people were more willing to go a few miles to their local cultural center, revitalized theaters or community centers then go into a larger city, pay for parking, deal with traffic, and pay higher fees. And it worked. He created an entire cottage industry for his comedy, and in many cases, he was the first professional performer the venues had ever seen. And boy did the people come out to see him, time and time again. I have always said, James' fans are literally "addicted" to him; they could not get enough.

We ended up striking a record deal with Sony, but it was short-lived. We shot an extraordinary comedy special that was supposed to be released in October of 2001. Because of 9/11, they postponed it and then postponed it again and again until James said he wanted the Special returned to him. Sony was never going to release it on James' timeline because they felt the time just wasn't right for comedy. As we all know, the time is ALWAYS right for comedy, so James moved on with his career and conducted business as he always had, continuing to perform 3-4 nights each and every week, 48+ weeks each year and sell his merchandise.

James also stayed loyal to the clubs that he had worked for decades and returned to each of them a couple of times every

year; like Bruce's club, the Stardome in Birmingham, or Brian's club, Zanies in Nashville, or Jordan's club, Comedy Off Broadway in Lexington, KY. All drivable, as James hated to fly.

2. James Gregory was a man of conviction, honorable, generous, opinionated, insightful, with an off-the-charts work ethic - and he preached this to anyone who would listen. Many of the guys who traveled with James or worked with him heard the same story on how to get ahead in SHOW BUSINESS!

When James wanted to accomplish something, nothing stopped him. I was pitching him back in 1999 for HBO's US Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen, Colorado. Of course, they wanted a short showcase video which James refused to submit. James couldn't clear his voice in a short video. He asked me, "what do we need to do?" I said, what about flying out the booker from L.A. to come see you at a show where she can see the entire show. He thought it was a great idea and he would pay whatever was needed. So, we flew Judy Brown, the talent coordinator, to Charlotte to see a sold out show at the Booth Playhouse and she ended up booking him to do his one-man-show in Aspen at the Festival.

Needless to say, it was a big hit!

3. James was born right here in Lithonia in his parents' kitchen. In fact, in James' memoir, which we just finished up a few months ago, he chronicles the entire story. The title of the book is "*A Bushel of Beans and a Peck of Tomatoes.*" Where this title comes from is, when James' mom's water broke, they couldn't get to the

nearest hospital. A doctor from down the road came and delivered James on their kitchen table. James' father didn't have the money to pay the doctor but assured him he would as soon as he could. Well, the one thing the Gregorys did have was a nice garden, so the doctor told James's father, "when your garden comes in, just give me a bushel of beans and a peck of tomatoes, and we'll call it even." His dad from time to time would remind James about this anytime he would get out of line. "Son," he'd say, "don't make me regret that bushel of beans and that peck of tomatoes." As James wrote in the book, "I've lived my whole life trying to keep that in mind. I never wanted my dad to regret what he got for that bushel of beans and a peck of tomatoes."

4. James started working at 11 years old; he was the first Gregory to graduate high school. James never quit working; it was just something he could not give up. Even when he had a well-deserved week or two off, he would say to me, "Lenny, you know I'm unemployed these next two weeks".

Even the last time he and I met just two weeks ago, we worked on photos for the upcoming book, going over countless pictures of family, friends, and colleagues dating back to childhood all the while telling me stories and reminiscing about each photo - who was in them and the year, situations, etc. It was a joyful few hours for James and me.

His work ethic was always out front in everything he did. Offstage, he made sure to let everyone know that he was in **SHOW BUSINESS** and ran it like a business. He owned his audio

and video recordings outright and used them to grow his platform long before social media. And now, with social media, he has continued to reach millions of new fans, many wondering, "how in the world did I never hear of this brilliant comedian all these years?!"

5. In 1995, after James' dad passed away, his material got a bit more edgy and for a short time, preachy, but it didn't take long for James to figure out his pain and reshape it into where the funny was and social relevancy. And even today, his material from almost 30 years ago is still relevant: from classroom violence and guns in schools, to animal rights, soccer moms and Hollywood Hippocrates - breaking new ground then but all relevant today! James' material was basically "common sense from the heartland of America."
6. James was in sales through his late 20's into his 30's and started in comedy late for most comedians (36 years old), but sales taught him so much about marketing and selling himself and eventually selling his merchandise.

James was the first comedian that I can recall that sold merchandise in the clubs. And he sold tons of it starting with audio cassettes and then his famous caricature on a long-sleeve high-quality jersey. Many comedians made fun of him standing at the merch table with a fist full of cash like a barker from a carnival, but, the man was amazing; after every show, there he was in the lobby or literally standing on the curb outside the club or theater hawking his products, which grew over the many years; cassettes, jerseys, then VHSes, then DVDs, then CDs...he had one of the funniest pitches during his shows: he'd say about his DVDs,

"you can buy one for twenty five, two for forty, 3 for fifty, 4 for sixty, hell, if you buy enough of them we'll just give 'em to you." It served him well, as other comedians started selling merchandise years later. Just an aside, James would be pleased to know that he has sold more merchandise through his website in the last week than he sold in the past two years.

7. James was also the first comedian to cut a straight split with club owners. At the time, most headliners got a flat fee, and big-name comedians took a giant flat fee which in many cases was a big risk for the club because if the act didn't sell tickets, the club would lose money that week. For James, he wanted to strike win/win deals with the clubs so no one would ever lose money when he was at the club. He was a partner with the clubs, win or lose. Most club owners went for the deal and James worked those venues multiple times each year for thirty plus years and some for forty years. And now, in most clubs, these door splits are the standard deal. James was doing it 35 years ago.

8. James never received national exposure - he established most of his drawing prowess organically by working in the clubs but where he excelled and perfected was on radio. James made thousands of appearances on local radio shows over his career and hundreds on syndicated radio shows. His voice was unforgettable and indelible. We could be sitting in a Waffle House at 2 o'clock in the morning following a show in some small town and you'd hear from the booth behind us, "I'd know that voice anywhere; you're The Funniest Man in America, aren't you?" This happened everywhere James went!

9. So, most of you know James hated to fly, loved to smoke cigarettes and cigars and was a staunch supporter of the US Military. In fact, for those of us that spent time with him over the past few weeks, he would hold court in his office smoking a cigar, sometimes nodding out, sometimes burning the papers on his desk, or even dropping burning ashes on his pants. Never fazed him though. It was James being James.

Certainly, over the past 20 years, when he was on the road, James was often spotted outside a hotel, sitting in an area with a bench smoking his cigar and talking with folks who had traveled hundreds of miles to see his show that night.

Back in January of 2002, James did a two-week military tour where he performed on an aircraft carrier, cruisers, and nuclear destroyers. I was his chaperone, and it was probably one of the highlights of each of our lives. The first stars to travel to the war zone during Operation Enduring Freedom were Jay Leno & Drew Carey, followed by Artis Gilmore and Spud Webb and then James Gregory. Here's a guy who is freaked out by flying and can't swim, but he was willing to travel some 20+ hours over water to land in the country of Bahrain. Then, we take a cargo plane from Bahrain over the Persian Gulf and land on the Teddy Roosevelt Aircraft Carrier - literally "caught the third wire". That was our home base for ten days where each day, we would take helicopters from one ship to another, to another and there were performances on each on the various decks of ships in front of hundreds of sailors and marines. It was overwhelming and powerful. We couldn't get enough of meeting the troops from all

over the U.S. We barely slept because we were so super-charged each and every day.

Anytime I couldn't find James, he was always in the smoking pit; every ship had one and typically James would be holding court with any number of marines and sailors. He was in his element, and they loved him! For ten days, the Indian Ocean was so calm and almost like a glassy lake...except for one day.

On this day, we came out to the deck after breakfast, and it was windy and the Indian Ocean was pretty rough. The person assigned to us let me know that we had a performance on a ship a few miles away at 11 am. And because of the wind, we wouldn't be taking a helicopter. I said, so how are we going to get there. He said, you see that boat hanging off the side of the ship, (known as a RHIB boat - Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat) - in actuality, it's a rubber raft. That's how we're going to get you there. I go, oh wow, knowing James would not be very pleased. So, I look for James and he's in the back of the boat hanging out with a bunch of sailors and marines, smoking, and holding court. I walk over to James and say, hey, I have something to tell you - you see that rubber raft hanging 8 stories above the water on rusted cables, that's how we're going to get to the USS Ogden to perform today. James says to me in front of all these guys, "you know, Lenny, before I had management, I never had these problems"...of course, they busted up. Then James asks, how are we going to get in there? I said, that's a good question. So, I walk back over to our guy and said, how are we going to get in there. He says, one of two ways: you can either climb in from here off the side of the boat and we'll lower you down or we can lower the boat and you can climb down the rope ladder. So, I go back to James and tell him that we'll be entering the boat from the side of the ship, and

they'll lower us down knowing there's no way my client can climb down 7-8 stories on a rope ladder with luggage.

We climb in the boat, and they lower us down - which took a good 10 minutes or so and as soon as the boat hits the water, we smack up alongside of the hull of the boat and a giant splash of water covers all of us on the boat. The three others on the boat, all in full military garb, including machine guns, are laughing and James and I are drenched. James' eyes were like saucers - we also have plenty of protection on, wearing goggles, life vests and head gear. We take off at high-speed, smashing against the white caps and before we know it the four miles have flown by and we're approaching the other ship, a very old ship and much lower to the water than the one we just came from...BUT, I'm thinking...how are we going to get on that ship from the water. As we get closer, what do I see, they're lowering down a rope ladder from a hatch. OH, WOW I say to myself! James is kind of in shock at all that has happened over the past thirty minutes, but he now must come to grips with what he will need to do. Fortunately, the hatch of the ship is lower to the water and there's only about 3-4 stories to climb, still a feat for a 56-year-old guy who's a tad overweight and smokes 3 packs a day. So, the raft pulls up along side the hanging rope and James starts his climb. Me to follow carrying two wheeled bags, my backpack and James' attaché case. I look like Jerry Lewis in *The Bellhop*.

James makes it to the top and I follow. What do I see when I finally climb into the hatch, but James literally sprawled out on the floor huffing and puffing trying to catch his breath; I am standing over him saying, "are you alright?" He looks at me and says, "take me to the smoking pit!"

Just one hour later James was performing on the deck of the USS Ogden for about 700 of our country's best and absolutely killed! What a trooper!

Thank you to Vinnie Coppola, Dan Mengini, Keith Alberstadt and Steve Mingolla for working with James over the past 35 years and traveling all the miles on the road; thank you to James' amazing 3 nieces who know him as Uncle Bubba: Martha Anne, Mary Jane, Candi and their families for taking such incredible care of James over the past many weeks and months; thank you to Susan for being James' rock and chariot for so many trips to Emory over the past 20 years and being his reliable and steadfast assistant for 30 + years.

10. James fought for his health until the end.

Just a couple of weeks ago, James said to me, "Lenny, I want you to close your eyes and picture me on stage...I plan on being back on stage soon. We have more work to do, so get busy!"

I promised him that I would preserve his legacy and make sure his nieces would enjoy the fruits of all his labor. I am so proud we were able to get James' memoir completed so his fans would know his back story and have a piece of him.

Anytime I close my eyes now, I can picture James on stage with his untucked shirt, big smile and giant presence that has impacted so many and will continue forever.

James, thank you for including me in your journey; it has been the honor of my life to work along side of you and on your behalf.

I love you Uncle Bubba!