

For Jamie Masada, *Comedy* is Just the *Start*

LAUGH FACTORY OWNER
AND PHILANTHROPIST
RECEIVES THE LA PRESS
CLUB'S ROSENDAHL
PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

BY JILL
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Jamie Masada knew from his first performance at the club that Dave Chapelle was going to be a star.

A few weeks ago, Jamie Masada, the storied founder and owner of the Laugh Factory, launched his latest project to make a better world. Naturally, he did it in the charming and bold style that has made him one of Hollywood's best-known good guys.

He fired off a press release to let Will Smith and Chris Rock know that he wants them to lead his new project to address mass shootings, "Stand Up to Violence!" He made the two superstars—and everyone else in the world—aware that he is, "willing to pay their

standard fees if they choose to participate. This issue is that important to me and the countless comedians who perform in America and throughout the world and all comedy clubs."

In Hollywood, everyone knows that a call for help from philanthropist Masada, whether in a private text or a widely distributed press release, is tough to ignore. Tonight, the Los Angeles Press Club is honoring Masada with the Bill Rosendahl Public Service Award for Contributions to Civic Life. It is named for the former journalist, Press Club president and, later, Los Angeles City Council member.

In his call to action, Masada wrote, "Today, violence seems to be everywhere in our communities—in supermarkets and schools, on our stages, and even in our houses of worship. We have reached out to Mr. Will Smith to collaborate with the Laugh Factory to release a public announcement in which we will collectively denounce violence and remind the general public that we must use our words to resolve issues, rather than physical action."

Masada has been shaping life in Los Angeles for decades. William Knoedelseder, an author, former *Los Angeles Times* business writer, and television producer, told *Variety* in 2019, "Jamie was a particularly young standup comic wannabe back in the middle-to-late '70s when the Comedy Store was at its



Jeff Vespa



Los Angeles Magazine/Jerry Henkel



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then-peak, and he was like a little brother to the Robin Williams and Jay Leno and David Letterman group of people."

Masada arrived in the city from Iran as a teen in 1977. He was living in a garage and speaking broken English. But as *Canyon News* reported in 2009, he was soon working with pros like Leno, Letterman, Richard Pryor and Redd Foxx.

In 1979, comedians boycotted the Comedy Store for refusing to pay them for their work, a dramatic episode in Hollywood lore retold by *Cracked*: "On the first night, Jay Leno even showed up—in a tank. He was being funny but also sending a message: This means war."

That year, budding comedian Masada

opened the Laugh Factory on Sunset Boulevard in digs once occupied by Groucho Marx. He operated on a shoestring, slept at the club, and showered at a YMCA. He managed to attract a \$10,000 loan from Neal Israel, who went on to write *Real Genius* and direct *Bachelor* and many other hits.

Masada decided to break the comedy circuit's lucrative tradition of paying comics nil, and instead split his "door" 50-50 with the talent. Masada, Knoedelseder said, "didn't know anything about running a place, but from what he'd seen going on and what everybody was upset about, he knew how not to run it."

The first comedian on the Laugh Factory's

The club's free holiday dinners were originally started to help struggling comedians, but later extended to the whole community, feeding thousands through the years.

Dane Cook, Masada, and Arsenio Hall serve Thanksgiving dinner at the club.



Los Angeles Magazine/AP Images

PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD JAMIE MASADA



Los Angeles Magazine



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Above: Masada outside the Laugh Factory in 1979.

Above, right: Tiffany Haddish was a 15-year-old student at the Comedy Camp early in her career.

stage was Pryor, who refused to take his half of the night's earnings—\$3.50.

Masada went on to great success, and along the way he launched numerous philanthropic and self-help programs and events. Lewis Howe, author of *The Mask of Masculinity* (2017), wrote that Masada is "like a comic kingmaker—some even call him the 'comedy godfather.'" The entrepreneur and philanthropist, Howe added, became "increasingly concerned about the mental state of many of these people he had put on stage."

Masada befriended Pryor and John Belushi, who for all their talents, Howe recalled, "gave themselves over to self-destruction." Howe added that Masada had, "seen too many comics come through his door carrying private demons the size of giants."

In response, he launched a free, four-night-a-week therapy program for comedians, with help from clinical psychologists. He told *Slate* in 2014 that he believed, "Eighty percent of comedians come from a place of tragedy. They didn't get enough love. They have to overcome their problems by making people laugh."

Over the past 35 years, his Laugh Factory Comedy Camp has served more than 1,000 children from inner-city neighborhoods in a free, eight-week program in which campers are coached by talented comedians. The big-name teachers have included Tim Allen, Alonzo Bodden (who is also the Press Club's in-house comedian), Jim Carrey, Dave Chapelle, Rodney Dangerfield, Jamie Foxx, George

Lopez, Jon Lovitz, Paul Rodriguez, Bob Saget, Adam Sandler, Pryor and Rock.

Also on the list of teachers is Tiffany Haddish, though one thing makes her unique. Many years ago, she was a student attending Comedy Camp. Today the South Los Angeles native is one of the world's top comedians. Tonight, she was meant to present the Public Service Award to Masada, but work called.

Masada's best-known philanthropic effort may be the free dinners he provides to those in need on Christmas and Thanksgiving—served up by major Hollywood names. As Masada told *GIVE Los Angeles 2020*, produced by *Los Angeles Magazine*, "I don't ask them (volunteers) to show up, they just come in and serve on Thanksgiving and Christmas every year. You name them, they've been there for these dinners, from Rodney Dangerfield to Richard Pryor. Year before last, Tim Allen came in with a briefcase of \$100 bills," to give to the diners.

In an interview with *Los Angeles Magazine* in 2020, writer Merle Ginsberg asked Masada what made him "such a care-taking person?"

"My dad taught me," Masada answered. "He was a very, very giving person. He'd walk home and he'd have a cookie in his pocket for my sister. He'd see someone homeless and give it to them. That to me is what it's all about. It's not just 'me, me, me.' Unfortunately, in the world now everybody's become... everything is about them. We're all together. We've got to help each other survive. That's the most important thing we have to do." 🍪

