

SIMON HOLDS THE CARD UP HIGH, so the rest of the audience can see it. "Please look at what kind of card it is, everyone." Ginny, despite her blindfold, responds "Oh, we don't see these very often. It's a Diner's Club card. Now, for security reasons—and for my own personal shopping use—I won't reveal the specific card number, but don't worry, ma'am, we both have plenty of time to use that card, because it doesn't expire until March of 2016." The crowd applauds enthusiastically.

his is the fifth object Ginny has correctly identified, and the act is becoming progressively more baffling to the audience. And the objects will continue to get more impressive: shoes and keys and credit cards give way to more bizarre objects: a pear, a hearing aid, a harmonica. "Who carries a harmonica?" I whisper to my friend, next to me. "I'll bet she won't get this." I reach behind the bar in the back of the room, where I had spotted a bottle of ketchup, and I hold it high. My friend snickers. As Simon passes me, I wave the ketchup bottle in his face. Without even a second thought, Simon asks me to stand and concentrate on my object. Ginny quips, "There are probably 57 varieties of this object, but I just relish this one. You've got some ketchup." The crowd erupts. I'm stunned. This has to be the first time they have encountered ketchup in their career. How could they be prepared for that?

As Simon makes his way down the next aisle, back toward the stage, Ginny correctly divines what a studious fellow is holding: the *lead inserts* for a mechanical pencil. In the next row several young men join together and lift up *an entire person*, one of their group! Ginny not only nails it—in fact, when Simon points specifically to the man's raised leg, Ginny calls out, "I'll go out on a

limb on this one." The audience howls.

That's how clean, straightforward, and deceptive it looks when you're watching their show, *It's the Thought That Counts*. I saw their act four times this year, for four different audiences. The shows (and the objects) were different each time, but all four shows I saw had one thing in common: each ended in a standing ovation.

Simon Aronson's reputation for creating blockbuster card miracles is well established; he's been doing it for over 50 years. Behind the scenes his wife Ginny has played an unsung but steadfast role. But more recently the duo has been resurrecting their rarely seen two person mind reading act for more public consumption, and Ginny, as chief mind reader, is now getting equal accolades.

Simon and Ginny Aronson have been married for almost 40 years, and have been a mind reading duo even longer. But they're the first to acknowledge that they're *not* professional performers; they both pursued successful lifetime careers in corporate law. Reading minds has always been a passionate sideline.

How do you juggle such disparate activities? "It can get very delicate," Ginny confesses. Early on (from 1970 to 1976) the



An audience of more than 200 at the Ohio Magi-fest hold up a sea of objects for Ginny to identify











Ginny successfully describes an American Express credit card, complete with expiration date

couple performed their mind reading act professionally throughout the Midwest. Ginny explains, "At that time we presented our act as a demonstration of experiments we had engaged in at the University, and some of our audience clearly 'bought' it. But once we were both practicing attorneys, many of our bookings were for private parties in the ritzy suburbs. I felt very uncomfortable when I started seeing some of my corporate clients in our audiences! It was pretty awkward to be their upstanding lawyer by day, then claim to be reading their minds at night."

And so, in 1976 the couple reluctantly decided to put their "professional" mind reading on the back burner to concentrate on their legal careers. "We had to choose between two different forms of deception," Simon jokes. But the couple has always kept their mind reading skills alive, performing their act at private parties, for their respective law firms and clients, for charity

fundraisers, and for select magic conventions (including Tony Andruzzi's Invocational, Juan Tamariz's Escorial, and the World Magic Summit, to name just a few).

This rarity of public performances over the past three decades has helped give the Aronson's act an almost legendary status. But now that the "attorney" Aronsons are both retired, they've aggressively moved their mind reading act to the fore, with a multitude of recent public performances. And it's no longer the same old act: they're quicker, more deceptive, and more entertaining than ever, as they focus on taking their performances to the next level.

The Aronsons came into my life in 1996. As a young teenager I was already deep into some of Simon's card material, so when I spotted him at a World Magic Summit convention, I hesitantly asked my mom to introduce me. I needn't have been shy—both Simon and Ginny were warm and approachable. Simon did a few tricks, watched my magic, and gave me critical but encouraging advice. When I mentioned that I had more original material, Simon suggested that I send him a videotape and he'd critique it. So began our video-by-mail sessions, followed by lengthy telephone calls to discuss them. Soon after I had a chance to travel to Chicago, and the Aronsons made their guest room available; since then, I've stayed there many times. Our magic relationship





Author Josh Jay during an early visit to the Aronson home

has been mutual: Simon asked me to write the introduction to his *Try the Impossible*, and on my first set of DVDs I arranged for Simon to be present as my interviewer. As I have grown up, my friendship with the Aronsons has blossomed, and I now seek their advice on much more than magic. We have colorful conversations on politics, philosophy, dating (Ginny gives particularly good advice on how women think), and my career. When my father passed away suddenly, the Aronsons were among the first calls I made for advice and comfort. Despite Simon's protests that it makes him feel "old," I've come to refer to them as "Uncle Simon and Aunt Ginny."

Having come to know them as a couple, I can attest that Simon and Ginny could not be more different in personality, in character, and in their magical history. But as a married couple and in their unique mind reading act, they complement each other perfectly.

New York: Beginnings

Simon was raised in the suburbs of New York City, first in Forest Hills, then in Rye. His parents, Arnold and Annette Aronson, were both well educated (Harvard and Radcliffe respectively; then graduate studies at the University of Chicago). His father was a civil rights lobbyist (awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Bill Clinton in 1998) and his mom was a lifelong artist (she inspired Simon's interest in modern art). Simon's younger brother Bernard was in politics for many years, serving both as speechwriter for Walter Mondale, and later as Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American affairs from 1989-1993. Simon was a math whiz, and although he's a self-described klutz at virtually anything athletic, he compensated by playing first position on his high school chess

Simon, age 11 in 1955; published in *The Daily Item*, the local newspaper in Rye to depict a young entrepreneur. Simon had just performed his first paid birthday party show.

team. With so much talent in the Aronson home, dinner conversations were seldom calm. Simon recalls "constant questions, debates and arguments, often competitive and tense, but always interesting." All three of the Aronson males were "highly intelligent and headstrong." Simon remains both to this day. (Simon's mom attempted, often in vain, to be the peacemaker)

Simon's initial introduction to magic, at around age seven, was via a magic kit, first a Mandrake Magic set, followed by a larger Gilbert Mysto Magic set. But Simon's curiosity, combined with his lack of athletic ability, pushed him beyond that. An avid bookworm, he quickly devoured every book in section 793.8 at the public library. In 1952 the Aronson family moved to Rye—only three blocks from Playland, New York State's second largest amusement park (after Coney Island). Playland was every school kid's dream, with two roller coasters and a full boardwalk along the ocean with carnival games (some of them honest). But most importantly, Playland also sported two fully stocked magic shops and Simon instantly became a fixture there.

Both stores were owned by an elderly cigar chomping pitchman named Emil Deutsch, who befriended Simon early on. (Simon now reflects that he might have been the shops' only "repeat" customer, since they catered mainly to visiting tourists.) Young Simon watched the pitches for Svengali and Wizard decks, saw dollars materialize from an Adams Money Maker, and was, on occasion, even permitted to open the packages and read the instructions. He was hooked, and his repertoire grew accordingly: it quickly included linking rings, an egg bag, and a milk pitcher—and he was still only 10 years old.

From then on, outside of his studies, magic occupied practically every moment of Simon's life. His parents encouraged his hobby, introducing Simon to the mecca of magic: Lou Tannen's.

In those days Lou Tannen's was a large operation, with a team of salesmen working behind the counter. Part of their sales approach included nurturing future customers by taking a personal interest in the development of young magicians. None other than Lou Tannen himself took Simon under his wing, teaching him how to present the tricks he bought, and even steering Simon away from items that might not yet be suitable. Simon remembers Lou fondly, as "short, red-headed, elf-like, always cheerfully bouncing around." Lou encouraged Simon to actually perform shows at birthday parties for money—Lou clearly knew where that money would ultimately be spent. And so, at age 11, Simon turned "pro" and began performing at children's birthday parties. His mother was his chauffeur.

Simon's teenage years furthered his addiction to magic. In January 1956 he appeared on television ("my only TV appearance ever") as the weekly "junior magician" on New York's local Magic Clown television show, earning Simon a box of Bonomo Turkish Taffy. As soon as he got his driver's license, the world of Westchester County opened up. Not only did this expand Simon's territory for birthday shows, but he joined the Westchester Talent Unit, a volunteer youth troupe who travelled by bus to different welfare institutions throughout the County—hospitals, orphanages, senior homes, reform schools—to present talent shows for the less fortunate. Simon still remembers performing a trick with a sucker climax for the inmates at Ossining's Sing Sing prison—and his relief when this bunch of hardened criminals burst out laughing when they realized they were "suckered."

Simon has many reminiscences of his early years in magic, but ironically one non-magical event has etched itself deeply into his memory. In 1956, his parents took him to see a Broadway play, *The Great Sebastians*, a comedy starring the reigning acting duo, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontaine, about—wait for it—a husband and wife vaudeville mind reading team. As the curtains open, we see a blindfolded, elegantly dressed Essie Sebastian standing on stage, but her tuxedoed husband Rudi is stepping through the



In 1960, at age 16, Simon was performing about six birthday shows a month.

first row of the actual audience of the theater. He holds up an object, and in stilted English asks Essie to identify it, which she does. He repeats this for a second object, and finally holds up a key, asking, "Quickly, this one?" But Essie draws a blank. So they conclude their "in theater" act, and the play "proper" begins. Essie's "mistake" becomes crucially important later in the script.

The rest of the play was a comedic story involving the aging vaudeville duo, but Simon was transfixed by the opening two minutes. Were acts like this still around? Did they use a code? Or were there just plants in certain seats each night? (Later in life, Simon researched *The Great Sebastians*, only to find that the script

is completely silent on this opening scene.) But no matter—Simon's first exposure to a two-person code act made an indelible impression. However, at only age 12 it was a bit premature to have a permanent partner. That would have to wait.

Simon's magic took a major step forward when he started meeting other magicians in New York City. Simon joined F.A.M.E., the Future American Magical Entertainers, a boys club that met Saturday mornings in an old YMCA building on the City's lower west side. Simon now had peers to share his hobby with. This opportunity to brainstorm, critique, and create with others—his first experience of "sessioning"—was eye-opening and productive, and he threw himself into it. Simon's fascination with card magic was spurred during these years, undoubtedly inspired by two of his peers in F.A.M.E., notably Persi Diaconis and Johnny Benzais. Simon befriended "Tommy," a tall, thin somewhat serious and reclusive fellow with a flair for mentalism. Simon and Tommy frequently had dinner together on Saturdays, jointly creating mental presentations for card magic. Simon still



1962 Westchester County Summer Tour

performs one of their collaborative effects to this day. Simon says it was, "the first place I really appreciated a subtle use of equivoque." Later Tommy moved to the West Coast, where he shortened his moniker to T.A. (Waters).

F.A.M.E.'s Saturday club meetings would break up around noon, and all the teens would walk over either to Lou Tannen's or Al Flosso's shop. Simon hung out at both, and got to know Flosso. Once in awhile Flosso would say, "Okay kid, you've earned it," and he'd invite Simon into the back room to witness a trick, or learn a secret. After visiting the magic shops, the teens would descend on the legendary 42nd Street Cafeteria, where every Saturday Dai Vernon, at one end of a big long table, held court; Simon, with the lesser mortals, sat at nearby tables, trying to watch or learn whatever they could. Magicians at the cafeteria introduced Simon to yet another opportunity to further his magic—the magic convention. Larry Weeks was then sponsoring quarterly one-day conventions in the city, and Simon attended religiously. Lou Tannen had only recently begun his annual "Magic in the Catskills," a weekend convention at Brown's resort. For several years, Simon drove up to the mountains, but "I couldn't afford the rooms, so I slept in my car." But it was worth

A CODE SHOULD SOUND NATURAL in whatever particular real-world context it will be used. And that meant Simon needed to devise something that would suit *his* vocabulary, *his* pacing, and *his* character, and would sound natural to his intended audience.

it: he witnessed Slydini, Vernon, Garcia, Londono, and countless others in their prime.

During the summers of 1960 and 1961 Simon realized his dream job—he was hired to operate the larger "Boardwalk" magic shop at Playland. For two months each year, Simon became a demonstrator, pitchman, teacher, showman, and salesman of all things magical. His audience changed constantly, a mixture of every demographic of the tourist trade. Simon was also supposed to sell the S.S. Adams line of practical jokes, and he warily tested the limits of visiting tourists. "I probably squirted people with ink a half-dozen times a day, and then had to calm them down for the next two minutes until the "ink" actually disappeared. Fortunately I had a sales counter between me and the customers, so if they got upset I could back away." Simon credits his job at Playland with helping his confidence, his patter, and his ease in performing for strangers.

Simon's first original card trick, "Maximus," was published in the September, 1959 issue of *Genii*; the following year *Genii* recognized Simon's budding status, featuring him in "Towns' Teen Topics" column (June 1960).

When Simon graduated from Rye High School in 1961, his class yearbook picture labeled him "Prestidigitator." This was prophetic in a far-reaching sense—a full half century later, at Simon's $50^{\rm th}$ reunion in 2011 for this very same Rye High school class, the featured entertainment was the Aronson's mind reading act.

CHICAGO: SCHOOLING AND FOOLING

Simon moved to Chicago to attend college and he's lived there ever since. Simon has always loved learning, and academically He was a natural. With an inquisitive, critical, and creative mind, he immediately placed out of his entire first year at the University

of Chicago (he graduated Phi Beta Kappa after only three years). Simon, typically eccentric, viewed this skipped year as a "loss" of education, so he compensated by spending an additional *nine* more years in advanced graduate studies. He has degrees in Philosophy, Economics (he studied with Milton Friedman), and Law. His professors and fellow students jokingly referred to him as "the only student with tenure."

And while he was receiving his university education, he received an education of a different sort via the Chicago magic scene. Bar magic alone offered a multitude of talent, with Johnny Platt, Jim Ryan, Senator Crandall, Johnny Paul, Matt Schulien, and Heba Haba Al each performing nightly. But card magic was king in Chicago, and with inspirations such as Harry Riser, Johnny Thompson, Al Leech, Sam Berland, and other luminaries, Simon was drawn further into the world of close up and cards.

In 1965 Simon met two individuals who would strongly influence his magic in different ways: David Solomon and Eddie Fields.

David Solomon was Simon's age and shared Simon's passion for card magic. Together, Simon and Dave met Steve Draun, and the three formed the core of Ed Marlo's roundtable, a weekly institution that continued until Marlo's death in 1991. When Bill Malone joined the "Marlo Table," Simon and Bill became fast friends. John Bannon's arrival in Chicago in 1990 rounded out a powerful triumvirate, and since then the "Chicago Session" (Aronson-Bannon-Solomon) has itself gained fame for their creative abilities and continued production of high-quality card magic.

1965 was also the year that Simon met Eddie Fields. Simon had heard that there was someone reading minds at Woolworth's (the five and dime store in Chicago's loop). Fields and his mind reading partner "Professor" George Martz, actually a former boxer,

did about six to eight horoscope pitches each morning and Simon watched them all. Indeed, for several weeks at a time, Simon skipped his morning classes to watch their act, absorbing all he could. Each pitch began with a blindfolded George demonstrating his psychic powers by identifying objects held up by the crowd of customers in the aisles. Between horoscope pitches Fields took breaks, and Simon and Eddie would have coffee together at the Woolworth counter. Eddie loved card magic, so they did tricks for each other, while Simon took in Eddie's spiels, tips, and anecdotes about mind reading. Simon learned much about the ins and outs of code work, but one thing they never discussed was the actual code Eddie used. Simon was curious, of course, but never pushed him, because that code was still Eddie's livelihood. As far as Simon knows, Eddie never taught anyone his code until after George died.

Simon decided then and there that someday he wanted to do that kind of two-person mind reading act, but he



1966: Matt Schulien amazes Simon. Taken at Schulien's when Matt performed for the Mazda Mystic Ring Club.

had mixed feelings about Fields' code. Simon was impressed at the depth of information the team could convey, and how Eddie could blend into the crowd. He was also stunned by the audience's reaction—there was no doubt that they believed completely. This was unlike any magic Simon had ever performed. On the other hand, Simon was shocked at how ungrammatical and awkward Eddie's speech was-even though it suited his character and Woolworth's context. Eddie would mumble, and would speak in half sentences. He'd start a sentence, and then break off midway to talk to someone else. There was no grammatical flow. But Simon lived in a context of university teachers speaking carefully in complete sentences. A code should sound natural in whatever particular real-world context it will be used. And that meant Simon needed to devise something that would suit his vocabulary, his pacing, and his character, and would sound natural to his intended audience.



1978: Simon, Bill Malone, Bob Syrup, and Ed Marlo

Simon was by then already presenting a solo mind reading show around Chicago, so in 1966 Simon suggested to his then girlfriend Diana that they try out some of his ideas. Over the next



1976: Practicing at home

For the next six months Simon researched everything he could find on two-person codes—the standard works of Corinda, Annemann, Hull, and Sharpe, all of Ralph Read's material, Mercedes's work, Julius Zancig's code, and privately circulated material including the Tuckers, Mardoni, and others. Jay Marshall generously made his library available to Simon, where he discovered old books, manuscripts, and one-page mimeographs, sometimes with just a list of code words. He thought about what makes a code act effective but invisible, and even applied some of the lessons he had learned from card magic to codes.

two years, Simon and Diana performed their show, "Miracles of the Mind" on the "chicken salad circuit" (mainly luncheons for women's clubs, sweet 16 parties, and synagogue and church groups). Occasionally they'd get a gig performing at one of Chicago's downtown nightclubs. On one such occasion in 1967, Simon invited his good friend Bob to accompany them, to sit in the audience and enjoy the show. Bob brought his own girlfriend along to make it a double date. The girlfriend, an attractive co-ed, was a shy, small-town girl who had never seen anything remotely like "mind reading." She later admitted that on their drive home

SIMON'S SCHOLARLY ARTICLE ON PLATO was immediately followed by his first published memorized deck effects in the Simon Aronson issue of *Kabbala*, (April, 1973), clearly a step forward in the development of western civilization.

from the nightclub, while the foursome chatted, she tried to prevent herself from "thinking private thoughts," for fear that Simon might read them. And, yes, Bob's girlfriend was Ginny, and this was the first time she witnessed the Aronson magic. Little did she realize the role she would later play.

Simon enjoyed performing mentalism and to build his reputation, in 1967 he gained some notoriety by successfully predicting the headlines of two of Chicago's newspapers. The publicity was only partially positive. One of the headlines Simon had predicted was that a kidnapped girl would be successfully found; afterward, the Chicago police criticized Simon for not coming forward earlier with his information (at least someone was convinced). In 1968 prior girlfriend Diana was replaced by new girlfriend Gloria, and for the next two years Simon had a new mind reading partner.

This is probably a good time to recall that during all of these magical activities, Simon was still happily engaged in his quest to become a perpetual, ivory tower student, focusing on Plato and Wittgenstein. When he decided to transfer from Philosophy to Law, not wanting to discard his unfinished dissertation, Simon published it in the prestigious *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol.X, No.4. Ironically, Simon's scholarly article on Plato was



1973: Ginny and Simon in law school



immediately followed by his first published memorized deck effects in the Simon Aronson issue of Kabbala, (April, 1973), clearly a step forward in the development of western civilization.

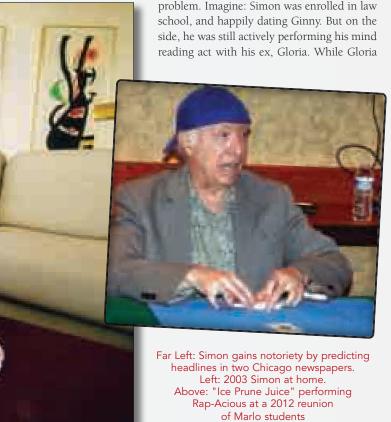
Law school did eventually end and it gave way to a flourishing career with the law firm of Lord, Bissell & Brook. Simon's legal expertise was in the area of real estate development. For the next 26 years, Simon was instrumental in building hotels, office buildings, shopping centers, condominiums and the like throughout Chicago. Ironically, his law practice also provided a fertile field for his most productive years in ... card magic. Entertaining his clients became a source of rainmaking and building personal ties, while secretaries and fellow lawyers enjoyed a steady flow of Simon's experimentation with the pasteboards. At a time before PCs and desktop publishing had yet to be envisioned, the law firm's word processing department made possible the steady production of Simon's first seven magic books.

Simon remained at Lord, Bissell for his entire legal career. As a unique "career exit," at his retirement luncheon in 1999, instead of receiving the traditional stuffy testimonial speeches, Simon and Ginny performed their act, reading the minds of about 80 normally staid law partners; the Chicago Tribune described it as "one of the more unusual moments in the world of high-powered law."

ENTER GINNY

In 1970 two parallel events occurred that would alter Simon and Ginny's lives forever-serendipitously, they each became "unattached." Seizing the opportunity Simon invited Ginny for a beer at the local student tap; four days later, she moved in with him. The rest is history.

> But their initial dating posed an unusual problem. Imagine: Simon was enrolled in law



SPEAK

AN INTERVIEW ITH GINNY ARONSON

imon Aronson has spent many years in magic's spotlight; now Ginny Aronson is stepping in front of the curtain, as the star of *It's the* Thought that Counts. I spoke to her one-on-one about the act, its underpinnings, and where it's headed.

Genii: Go back to when Simon first taught you the mind reading. Was it difficult to learn? Did it take a long time?

Ginny: Well, back in 1970 the extent and complexity of



Simon's code was nothing like it is now. So from a sheer memorization perspective, it wasn't impossible. The part that frightened me most was simply the idea of getting in front of an audience and speaking as if I were a confident mind reader. I had never done much public speaking at all, and this role not only required me to deceive people, but also to do most of it impromptu. There's not much script when the objects might be anything. So, I was scared to death by the acting and performing aspect. And I still get nervous, before any performance.

Genii: You say the code wasn't as complex at the beginning. Has it changed much?

Ginny: Again, not just one single answer. The basic original structure, certain key words and underlying principles of organization, those are all still in place. In a sense, the history of our act tracks the history of everyday objects. In the 70's, people might hand us draft cards, or a slide rule, or even a Mah Jong card, then later a Walkman or a cassette. Nobody even remembers such objects now. But it's the scope of objects we try to cover, and the level of detail we can achieve, that's now night and day beyond what was originally in place. And it grows all the time, it's continuing to expand with every show we do.



At a recent convention, David Blaine (at the right) asked us to show him what we did; as soon as we started, a crowd instantly surrounded us. (That's Bill Malone at the extreme right, and Greg Wilson in the middle).

and Simon were off performing at nightclubs until the wee morning hours, Ginny was often left to spend her weekend evenings alone. "Simon insisted that his time with Gloria was 'purely mental'," Ginny recalls. "I may have still been a small-town girl, but I wasn't naive. Clearly, this situation wasn't going to work."

Ginny had no desire to go into show business; she was shy and quiet, not used to public speaking, and the thought of getting onstage and deceiving people was intimidating. But Simon loved both the mind reading and Ginny, and didn't want to give up either one. And so the two of them resolved to turn Ginny into a mind reader. They performed their first show together that winter, and neither one has ever had or needed another partner since. They tied the knot in 1974.

Let's catch up on Ginny. While she didn't enter the world of magic until she started dating Simon, she has followed an education and career path that eventually brought her to the upper echelons of worldwide corporate law.

She was born and raised in Bremerton, Washington, a small town across the bay from Seattle. Her upbringing was quite dif-

ferent from Simon's. Her father died when she was nine, and so she took on an increased role in raising her siblings. She

cooked meals for her family from an early age, a skill that blossomed into a lifelong passion: she is an exquisite cook, and still takes advanced classes on various cuisines and culinary pursuits.

Like Simon, Ginny was a bookworm and an excellent student. Although she had never considered going out-of-state for college, when an interviewer from the University of Chicago explained that they had a special "small-town talent search," Ginny jumped at the opportunity. The University offered her a full scholarship, which allowed her to make the leap; she started as a freshman in 1965.

Chicago was eye opening in many ways, but Ginny has always been a hard and determined worker. She persevered in her studies, receiving her B.A. degree in Sociology in 1969. She received a National Institute of Health full scholarship to continue her

graduate studies at NYU. A year later she returned to Chicago, both to take further courses at the University of Chicago and to work at the National Opinion Research Center, a forerunner for scientific polling for sociological studies nationally; one of Ginny's more interesting assignments was training interviewers for the Kinsey Institute's first-ever national study on homosexuality. She received her Master's degree in Sociology from U of C, and seeing how much Simon was enjoying law school, she decided to switch careers and attend law school. And that's where she blossomed, beginning her rise to legal superstar.

It's rare that the subject of a magic magazine is also such an impressive figure in a totally different sphere, but Ginny Aronson certainly qualifies. Major articles have been



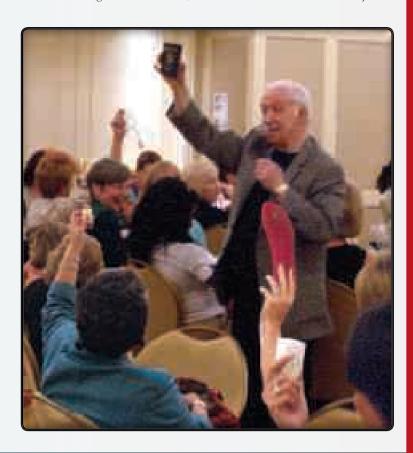
Ginny, Managing partner of her Law Firm



written on Ginny's contributions to the legal profession, and to women lawyers in particular (see, for example, *The Leading Lawyer*, February 2008); let's touch on some of the highlights.

In law school Ginny was quickly published in the *Law Review*, and upon graduation in 1975 she was immediately hired as an associate at Sidley Austin, then (and now) one of the country's most esteemed law firms. The percentage of women in major law firms at that time was miniscule. But in the male dominated field of real estate law Ginny made her mark. She soon became a significant rainmaker for the firm, landing Citicorp (among others) as a major client. Her rise to full partnership, then to head of the firm's entire Real Estate department, followed rapidly.

In addition to her complex law practice Ginny was put in charge of planning, acquiring, and designing new office space to accommodate the firm's rapid expansion. As Sidley grew internationally, with 18 offices worldwide stretching from London to Tokyo, Ginny's hectic workload was compounded by global travel. Ginny bemoans, "I actually had to fly round trip to Hong Kong just to attend a one-day meeting, and then immediately return to Chicago. I was on the airplane for more time than I was on the ground in China." There was a significant period of time when Simon and Ginny communicated mainly by email, and Simon later summarized his contribution to Ginny's career, claiming, "Behind every successful woman is a man who knows how to operate a microwave." As one of the most-senior women in the firm, younger female associates looked to her as a role model. Ginny took on this mentoring role with gusto, travelling to the firm's many offices to assist their female attorneys. In 1998, at the peak of her career, Ginny was appointed to Sidley's Management committee, the first woman in the firm's 150-year



Genii: How do you mean?

Ginny: Well, I don't want to give away specifics, but at virtually every performance, if the audience is creative, there will be some article that we weren't prepared for, or some detail that we'd wish we had a way to transmit—so in our post mortem after each show we'll try to figure out ways to cover it in the future. Our lists of possible articles that we might get now is mindboggling, and that's largely because of what we've been actually presented with over the past 40 years of performing.

Genii: What are some of the most unusual objects you've got?

Ginny: Hearing aids, a laser, a bullet, pistachio nuts, a leaf—you'd be amazed! We've had handcuffs, a baby diaper, a toy rubber duck—you name it! At our recent show at Magic Chicago, a woman held up something small—I'm surprised Simon could make it out, because his eyes aren't that good—so I said, "This lady's into fixing something, but it's not from a normal tool chest. It's used to fix your eyeglasses. It's a tiny pocket eyeglass repair kit." The audience went wild.

Genii: So, how did you do that one? Were you already prepared for such an object, just in case one ever came up?

Ginny: No comment. But you're right to ask, because often we're not prepared for everything. So, we have ways of "getting close" or maybe saying "something" about it, even if we don't nail it. Simon is very good at thinking on his feet, and the audience has no idea that he may be winging it.

Genii: Can you give me an example of how that might work? Without breaching any secrets ...

Ginny: Sure, and this was one of my favorites. In one show, Simon sent me a cue, so I announced, "I'm getting the impression of something to do with music." But then Simon asks me to be more specific, to say something more about it, and in doing so, he's secretly sent me the cue for an entirely different object, a fork! Now, keep in mind that in this act, I am quite literally in the dark—I can't see anything and don't have a clue as to what the object is, except for the cues Simon sends, but I know he's combining things, creating as he goes along. So, I'm thinking "Music, Fork" but I can't imagine what it is. Who knows, maybe somebody can play a fork, the way people can play the spoons? So, I throw out what I have, and say, hesitantly, "Yes, it's clearer, I'm also getting the impression of a fork, some kind of a musical fork?" And immediately Simon cries out triumphantly, "Yes, that's exactly what it is, it's a tuning fork!" And the audience bursts into applause.

It's a form of jazzing, of making things up, and also of causing people to remember things the way you want them to remember. That audience will always remember



Performing for the 2013 University of Chicago Alumni Banquet

history to become a Managing Partner. She spent the next 10 years both managing the firm and practicing law. Because of her real estate expertise, she spearheaded the design, construction, and furnishing of the firm's new 40-story office tower in Chicago; it's now an architec-

tural landmark on the city skyline. Having read Simon's mind, she finally retired at the end of 2010.

One might assume that being a workaholic (which Ginny was) would go hand-in-hand with a hard-nosed, cold, aggressive character (which Ginny most assuredly is not). Indeed, her demeanor is thoughtful and sweet, but at the same time confident and driven—the proverbial "iron hand in the velvet glove" (something which Simon definitely is not.)

But perhaps most amazingly, throughout her legal career Ginny continued to be both "magic wife" to Simon's card magic career and the "star" of *It's the Thought That Counts*. And in fact, her law career and her role as mind reader mutually enhanced her confidence, her public speaking, and her persona as a leader.

REINVENTING THE ACT

Once Ginny retired, she and Simon decided to revive their mind reading act. But they didn't just want to reprise it. They wanted to make it better. Their first step, both to rejuvenate and to experiment, was to start performing more frequently, both for the public and magicians.

Anyone who's ever seen the Aronsons in action has always marveled at their technical prowess in identifying objects held up by the audience, but there's always room for improvement, and past history has shown them exactly where they want to go. "It's literally in the details," Simon explained, only half jokingly. "We've always got our biggest reactions when, after identifying an object, Ginny then goes further by tossing out added details, almost as an afterthought." Unexpected details produce more surprise and allow for greater drama; revealing information piecemeal provides more play from each person's article and offers avenues for finding hidden climaxes. Certain details, like



the date on a coin, are almost standard. But now the Aronsons are expanding these types of details to a multitude of unexpected objects. Brand names have become a fertile area for expansion; in the several shows I witnessed, Ginny specifically identified a Budweiser beer bottle, a Costco card, a Pentax camera, a key to the man's BMW, and a bottle of Tylenol. There's a YouTube clip where, after first revealing that a spectator was thinking of a bill from a foreign country, Ginny brings it to another dimension by announcing, "It's from Zimbabwe." And remember, these were unplanned, random objects. Who knows what the Aronsons can do? Well, I'm sure there are limits, but I know from personal experience that they're willing to go the extra mile to try: on their recent trip to perform in England, they first researched the most popular British banks, and the country-specific credit card brands, just in case.

Mystifying though it is, the act would quickly become boring if all Ginny does is name the objects correctly; she has to identify them in an entertaining way, and for the Aronsons, that means light-hearted and humorous (as opposed to bizarre or mysterious). While impromptu, off-the-cuff adlibs are best, there's no substitute for just sitting down and scripting as many humorous responses as possible beforehand. Ginny's humor now seamlessly blends both approaches: corny puns ("I bristle at the thought of this" for a hairbrush) mixed with lines that present themselves as randomly as the objects they are given ("Is this used for law enforcement or in the bedroom?" for handcuffs).

While object identification is the highpoint of their act, the Aronsons have always recognized that it can't be the only thing they do. There's a need for buildup and variety, so in the first part of their act Simon and Ginny present several other feats of mental magic, each one tailored to a presentation by *two* people.



By starting small, for instance, with an ESP test, they can point out that the odds are only one in five; they can then graduate to a playing card effect (one in 52), where the audience senses the increasing difficulty level. The culmination of this progression is their trademark Las Vegas dice test. Imagine Ginny (still completely blindfolded); she patters about how valuable mind reading might be in Las Vegas. Simon introduces a fishbowl containing over 100 different colored dice, "souvenirs from the many casinos." Audience members freely choose any two dice, and Ginny instantly calls out their colors (first climax). The audience is impressed ... but then she requests a spectator to roll those dice and think of the total. Again, she nails it (second climax). The audience applauds ... but, with a "wait, there's more" tagline, she follows up with, "Yes, the total is an eight, but there are many ways to make an eight. This time you've rolled a three and a five ... and to be more specific, the three is on the green die and the five is on the pink one" (third climax). This stuns everyone, but it is particularly bewildering to magicians, who can appreciate just how impossible this effect would be to achieve. Simon feels it's the most efficient idea he's ever developed, but he won't say more.

Not all the plots are simply "Ginny reads minds." The Aronsons have experimented with the reverse premise—an audience member reads Ginny's mind. Every mentalist I've ever



seen performs some form of prediction effect; the Aronsons sell it as Ginny's "mentally influencing choices." Indeed, their stunning prediction of two freely chosen playing cards (from an examined, shuffled deck) also tells the audience a little something about Simon and Ginny personally: that they enjoy and collect modern art—because the prediction is revealed on a piece of abstract art that has been in full view all the time.

It was Max Maven who once pointed out to the Aronsons, "You have one rare feature going for you: there are two of you. And that gives you an opportunity to develop something that single acts don't have: the relationship between you." Ginny and Simon took this advice to heart, and now they're trying to bring out their "husband/wife" relationship, and the contrast between Simon's charac-

that I "got" a tuning fork. And of course immediately after that show, tuning fork was added to our categories. So if we ever get another one, we're now prepared.

Genii: Your act is very flexible. I've seen you perform on stage for several hundred people, and also for small groups just in the halls of a convention.

Ginny: Simon says that for close-up, all he needs is a deck of cards, and for the mind reading, all he needs is a wife, preferably his own. But our act is 100 percent ready to go, anytime, anywhere. If we don't have a blindfold handy, I just turn my back. We've done it poolside, anywhere. We once performed impromptu for an entire group while driving in a tour bus. I just stood up front and Simon walked the aisle. The only thing we're always concerned about is audio.

Genii: What do you mean? I've seen you perform without microphones or speakers.

Ginny: I absolutely have to hear Simon's every word; if I miss a one syllable cue I can get it wrong. So we're always aware of background music, or the level of chatter in a room, or any sound coming from an adjoining room. Sound issues even affect our pacing. The audience usually applauds after I get an object right, but Simon often times his next cue during this applause moment. If the applause makes me miss a word, I'm dead, but the alternative of having Simon wait until the applause subsides can slow the act down and not hide Simon's speaking as much. So, there's a tradeoff.

Genii: What's your favorite part of the act?

Ginny: Well, certainly I enjoy being the star. In the early days, we were both reading minds, in different tests, but more recently we've structured all our demonstrations so that it's just me who has the mind reading skills; Simon is there more "to help" because of course I'm blindfolded.

Genii: Is that arrangement okay with Simon? I've known him for a long time, and he's got a strong ego. Is he all right with playing second fiddle?

Ginny: This was completely Simon's idea. Simon has a big ego, no question about that, but only in the area of his creating great magic; he's never held himself out as a performer. In our mind reading, Simon wants the focus to be on me as much as possible, so that the audience will almost forget he does anything. He jokes that he'd love it if they remember us as a "one-person act."

Genii: It's hard to believe anyone won't notice him.

Ginny: I agree. It's actually ironic—the only person who doesn't see Simon is me! Since I'm blindfolded, I never actually get to see him in action. So one thing I've really enjoyed is the few times someone films a video of our performance—that's when I get to see how Simon's working the crowd, maybe cuing one object while he's already looking at another, to get ahead, even turning



Magic Chicago, 2013

ter (a punster, cocky and flirtatious) versus Ginny (all sweetness, innocent, and thoroughly believable). As the Aronsons' act evolves, they are entering new territory in which it reveals not just objects, but something about them, their interests, and their relationship. Their opening lines are a perfect example:

Simon: After you've been married for a while, husbands and wives often develop special forms of communication. Many of us intuitively finish each other's ...

Ginny (interrupting): ... sentences. [Pause for laughter.] But we take it a step further. We finish each other's thoughts.

After Simon explains that Ginny will be telling the audience, "what they have on their minds," Ginny offers the following assurances:

Ginny: But please relax! No one will be embarrassed. We don't invade anyone's personal or private thoughts. ... We leave that to Facebook.

In a few short sentences, they set the tone. And this banter and byplay continues throughout their show. When a woman holds up a piece of jewelry, Ginny describes it and sarcastically adds, "I wish Simon had such good taste." None of this is accidental. The aim is to enhance the entertainment by making the audience smile while they're being mystified. And Ginny and Simon accomplish this by conveying the sense that they're having fun doing it. The Aronson's "relationship" is contagious.

BEYOND MAGIC

I mentioned at the outset that Ginny and Simon could not be more different in personality and character. Ginny is practical, even-keeled, friendly, gentle, quiet, cautious, and hesitant to make big changes quickly.

Simon is uninhibited, loquacious, aggressive, moody, impulsive, and can react intensely before he calms down; he's often

cynical and critical. They complement each other perfectly. Simon has a fertile imagination, while Ginny is constantly there to bring him back to the real world.

Ginny and Simon's dual legal careers, extending for their full working lives, and their magic and mind reading, are more joint activities than many couples share—but those aren't the only interests the two have in common. Indeed, to know them is to be impressed with how many other areas they've pursued, each time throwing themselves into it with an intensity and thoroughness normally reserved for one's exclusive passion. Take modern art. The two have been acquiring art for over 30 years and their vacations and travel often are centered around art museums and galleries around the world. To view the Aronson's home is to walk into a mini museum of abstract art, the walls bursting with color. The works are by artists famous and unknown, but all of them evidence the couple's joint explorations and decisions—because no new piece gets purchased unless both of them agree.

They both take lessons in piano, and surprisingly, ballroom dancing. For over 20 years Simon and Ginny were active international style ballroom dancers, taking private lessons from some of the world's top coaches, attending dance competitions, and even participating in a grueling week of ballroom dance camp for seven summers in a row. The first time I stayed with the Aronsons I was shocked to discover a full ballroom (possibly the only 29th floor ballroom in the world).

The Aronsons truly have built a life together, both inside and outside of magic.

GOING FORWARD

Retirement for Ginny and Simon doesn't mean doing less; indeed, they view it as a chance to do more of what they love.

They're always busy, juggling activities, taking on new projects—it's simply all by choice.

The future portends more of the same. Simon is still contemplating one final card book, but won't accept any "padding" just to finish it. More pressing is the issue of what to do with the mind reading act. Each time I question Simon about whatever it is they're "really" doing, I get intriguing anecdotes and insightful ideas about "naturalness" in language, about how alternative cue words can function quite differently, and a host of other tidbits of theory about this quite esoteric area. Simon keeps copious notes and, knowing the depth of his thinking and writing style, if he ever got around to putting his over 45 years of experience down on paper, I'd guess it could become a "definitive" work on second sight acts. Ginny herself urges him to write "the book" now, just in case. And Simon assures me that it's solely a question of when, not whether. "But writing takes a lot of time and effort, and for now, we're just having way too much fun performing our act." •



away sometimes so that it looks like he's not even near the object I'm describing. During the actual performance I can't tell what's happening; I'm only hearing his voice.

But candidly, I guess my favorite thing about the act is that we're a team, it's something we do together, totally. Planning new routines, scripting, rehearsing, we're a duo. Here's one tiny example: very few husbands accompany their wives when she's shopping for cosmetics. Well, I need to take Simon with me, at least until he can tell the difference between eye liner, lipstick, and blush. So the mind reading is another bond that unites us. It's a bit like our years of ballroom dancing—the couple either rises or falls together.

Genii: What's your least favorite part?

Ginny: Certainly my nervousness before each show. No matter how often we do it, I'm a mess until the show actually begins. Once it starts, I'm fine. But I guess my least favorite part is when people come up to me after the show, and it's clear that they truly believe I have psychic powers. I remember back in the 1970s, during the Viet Nam war, a woman approached me and said her son was missing in action, and wanted me to assure her that he was still alive. And one lady pulled me aside, sort of in confidence, and told me her father was about to die, and when he did, she wanted to consult with me about reaching him.

Genii: That's got to be uncomfortable. How did you respond?

Ginny: Simon's pretty good at diffusing such situations. He quickly steps in, says we're simply entertainers, and what we do is limited to just objects and playing cards, nothing beyond the room we're in. We don't want to go anywhere near "question answering," or even encouraging anyone to seek psychic counseling. That's a downer.

Genii: Do you ever tell them you're not for real, just to stop them from persisting?

Ginny: That gets into the whole realm of ethics in mentalism, and disclaimers. Every performer has to draw their own line somewhere, and for us it's more of what you do or encourage, rather than what you say. We always emphasize that we're here "solely for your entertainment," but when people ask us directly if we're "real," Simon's stock answer is, "We're as real as they come!" I find that pretty funny in a way.