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Opening doors with entertainment

Between his jokes, juggling and magic, Nielsen delivers his message

BY JANICE FRANCIS-SMITH
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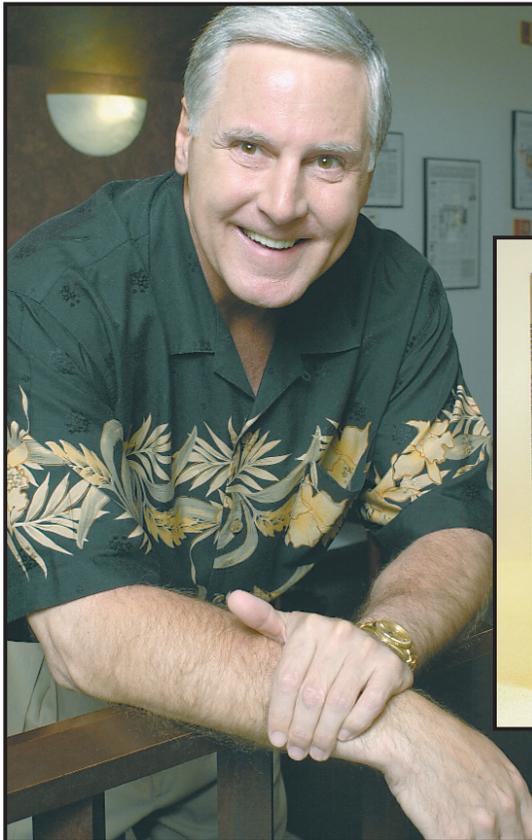
What do business people, school children, convicts and athletes have in common? Just about anybody loves to watch a good magician. Miraculously restore a shredded newspaper with a wave of the hand or pull off a good card trick, and chances are you'll have most people's attention.

As an inspirational speaker, Rick Nielsen appears before groups of people who most likely are routinely subjected to boring meetings, classes, sermons and seminars. While getting their attention is a usually a challenge for motivational speakers, Nielsen, a magician, juggler, and humorist, has found a way to get even the most jaded customers to listen to him.

"The entertainment works everywhere," said Nielsen. "It's going about it kind of from the back door, with the entertainment opening the door for the message. People like to be entertained, they like to laugh, they like something that's fun to watch. And all the entertainment is hopefully doing is opening the door to their ears and their hearts, and making the message ... palatable. We had a good time, and we learned something."

Once he has their attention, he can do what he really came for – impart a message that has changed lives. Though the people he speaks to are vastly different, Nielsen's message works to make them better at what they do by helping them become better people.

"I tell corporations when they call I'll have something that will challenge your employees' hearts more than their brains," said Nielsen. "A lot of times they have lots of meetings



teams, church groups, trade organization conventions and death row inmates.

"Everybody struggles," said Nielsen. "Everybody needs encouragement. Everybody needs

build a relationship with an audience and kind of get their attention," said Nielsen. "He and I became great friends, and one day I just said, 'Can I learn some of this stuff? I love what you do and I've always wanted to help people.' He had been looking for someone to pass a little of his skill on that would use it for the right reasons and communicate our Christian faith. So he taught me a trick, and I was like a sponge. I couldn't get enough. He got me started in the work I'm doing in prisons."

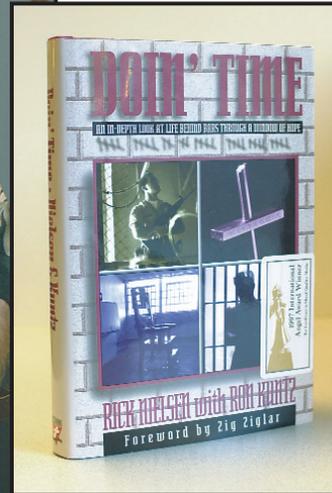
Nielsen's experiences while visiting 600 prisons around the world with the Bill Glass Prison Ministry are recorded in *Doin' Time*, the book he wrote with Pulitzer Prize-nominated photographer Ron Kuntz.

Though Nielsen is on the road most of the time – "I've got 3 million miles with Northwest Airlines," he said – he recently relocated his home base from Iowa to Oklahoma City.

Much of his message deals with the power of words, and the power each person has to make a difference in the lives of others. While the underlying message is based on Christian values, Nielsen can tailor the material to make the religious message more "subtle," he said.

His advice also works in a secular plane. For instance, he tells his audience to imagine that everyone they come in contact with that day has the words "Make me feel important" written right across their forehead. While aimed at improving the human condition, the concept also profound implications for customer service personnel.

"So many times somebody will see the ministry part and they'll be scared that we can't have him in our school," said Nielsen. "Not true at all. I love the diversity of being able to deliver stuff in all of those environments. I think as Christians, the greatest place we can be in is in corporations and businesses and schools and those kinds of places, living out our faith as we help other people. St. Francis of Assisi once said, 'Preach the Gospel. Use words if necessary.'"



AUTHOR Rick Nielsen and his book.

PHOTO BY MARK HANCOCK

that are technical, on policies and procedures and here's-how-to, you know, time management and stress. But a lot of times, what they need is something that makes the employee better. Those corporations have got tons and tons of guys in their three-piece suits that are smiling out here, but inside the alligators are chewing them up.

"And so my role is to go in and try to tackle some of the non-technical issues, more how to inspire people and how to motivate people and things that will help employees make a difference in their work and in their lives."

The founder of Blueprint For Life, a nonprofit organization, Nielsen has traveled all over the country for 20 years, speaking before a wide variety of organizations – from K-12 schools to college and professional sports

help and hope. I like that fact that I can hopefully be salt and light in all of these different settings, and tailor my program to the needs of the group. I can do all of these other venues and still make a positive difference, and bring a message that will be of encouragement to people."

A native of Iowa, Nielsen said he had always wanted to be a coach and teacher, like his father. He "started his spiritual journey" in high school, and soon began speaking publicly as part of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. After graduating from the University of Northern Iowa, Nielsen said he got the chance to serve as driver for "The Yo-Yo Champion of the World" Bunny Martin, a professional magician and humorist and longtime speaker for the FCA.

"I watched him entertain, and I thought, that's really a great tool to