

# MDA Removes Jerry Lewis As Telethon Host

BY STEVEN ZEITCHIK AND DEBORAH VANKIN  
Los Angeles Times (©2011 MCT)

LOS ANGELES — For the first time in 45 years, Jerry Lewis will not be in front of a camera Labor Day weekend after he was abruptly dismissed as the host of the Muscular Dystrophy Association's telethon, an event that drew attention to the childhood disease and in its heyday was an annual television highlight.

The group said the legendary comedian would not appear on this year's telethon, and would no longer serve as its national chairman, a position he held for nearly 60 years. The telethons have raised nearly \$2.5 billion, the MDA said.

The announcement and the mysterious circumstances around Lewis' departure provoked an outcry from comedians and other performers, who still widely revere him for his groundbreaking routines and public service.

"As a fellow comedian, it's really crappy the way they treated him," Paul Rodriguez said. "The man is an institution. They should have found a better way to let him go."

The MDA said it did not expect to name a new host this year and that the Sept. 4 event would be shepherded by entertainment personalities Nigel Lythgoe, Jann Carl, Alison Sweeney and Nancy O'Dell.

"Jerry Lewis is a world-class humanitarian and we're forever grateful to him for his more than half century of generous service to MDA," said MDA Chairman of the Board R. Rodney Howell.

The decision represented an about-face from MDA's announcement in May that Lewis would host the telethon for a final time this year, and would appear in the closing moments of future telethons to sing his trademark number, "You'll Never Walk Alone."

The marathon telecast was once a must-stop venue for comedians and entertainers. During the height of its popularity, the telethon featured performances from show business luminaries, including Sammy Davis, Liberace, the Supremes, Johnny Cash and Frank Sinatra.

In recent decades, the event's appeal faded with younger viewers who found the format somewhat dated. Indeed, the telethon model itself as a fundraising vehicle lost much of its force, particularly with the rise of the Internet, which emerged as a more potent generator of donations.

Even before ousting Lewis, the MDA was poised to scale back the telethon from more than 20 hours to as few as six, primarily because stations were threatening to drop all or part of the telecast.

The telethon's earning power had declined in recent years. According to public tax filings, the telethon brought in \$56.4 million in gross receipts in 2005. But in 2009, the latest year for which records are available, the tally dropped to \$45.6 million.

A spokeswoman for Lewis said the star had no comment on his exit from the telethon. But others rallied to Lewis' defense.

Jamie Masada, the longtime owner of Los Angeles venue The Laugh Factory, said he's received a dozen messages from comedians, including from Dane Cook and Dave Chappelle, expressing anger over the way Lewis had been let go.

## Sheridan

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never wanted to stop. "Obviously it takes some talent, luck and being in the right place at the right time. I think there are a lot of factors that the universe can conspire and make happen if it's meant to be. Also with perseverance, if you really follow your passion and your bliss you can make anything happen. In any field. I think fear stops us. It's always been a motto of mine to embrace my fears and walk through them because it's always amazing what you come out to on the other side."

One of those sides is the "big sister" role she often plays with friends. "Helping others really changes you because you get outside yourself and you can really affect people with light and love and hope," she says.

"I was always a child psychologist. I was always the one to help my friends and being the listening ear and able to offer up advice, not necessarily knowing where it came from other than just an organic caring. I'm still that person. And I'll put others before myself and it's always very important to pay attention to yourself and to listen to your needs and not put yourself on the back burner. And that's a tough one for me. But I'm learning."

"He's the face of the telethon," Masada said. "Without him, there's no show."

Lewis himself said Saturday at the summer TV press tour in Beverly Hills that he saw himself continuing, in part because his role as host went beyond a show business opportunity. When a questioner asked what he would have to do to be satisfied with his life, he replied: "Get the cure for muscular dystrophy, then I'm fine."

joined the project. "It was a little less obvious than a typical romantic comedy," he said. He promptly cast Eisenberg, who was also in Fleischer's walking-dead comedy. "I thought it would be a great opportunity for him to play a slightly different character," the director added. Said Eisenberg at the film's premiere: "It's rare to find a movie that's very funny and has characters that are real."

MRC eventually sold the movie, made for approximately \$28 million, to Sony Pictures, which is releasing "30 Minutes or Less" around the world.

Monica Levinson, one of the film's

executive producers, said that even if young women are showing strong interest in the latest "Final Destination" thriller, there's no reason to assume "30 Minutes or Less" is just for guys.

"I think there's a big misconception about what women want to see," Levinson said. She added that while the film might not have the star power of some of the summer's other comedies, "it's a very original story - it's not 'The Hangover' with kids. You can't compare it to anything else."

Some people, though, see uncomfortable parallels between "30 Minutes or Less" and the real story of Brian Douglas Wells, a Pennsylvania pizza deliveryman who robbed a bank and was killed by a time bomb locked around his upper body in 2003.

"It's hard for me to grasp how other human beings can take delight and pride in

making such a movie and consider it a comedy," Wells' sister wrote in an email to the Associated Press. "I don't think it's funny to laugh at the innocent who are victimized by criminals, who care nothing for human life." Prosecutors said Wells might have been involved in planning the crime, which ended in Wells' dying from the bomb when stopped by police.

"Anyone who sees the movie will be able to judge whether it relates to that or not," Fleischer said. "I've tried to distance myself from that as much as possible."

As to the film's prospects, particularly after a host of summer comedies have grossed more than \$1 billion combined worldwide: "We'll see if people have a fatigue," the director said, "or are excited for the final comedy of the season."

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