



Something Funny

Happened on the Way to Singapore ...

In many ways, Terry "TJ" Johnson is everything the average Singaporean isn't. He's a 6-foot 2-inch African-American guy who talks to strangers, drives cautiously and tells jokes for a living.

by Heidi Sarna

TJ is the type who strikes up conversations with people he doesn't know, routinely leaning over to the next table in restaurants to coo at babies, compliment someone's eye glasses or sniff around a stranger's sandwich. Without a self-conscious bone in his body, he dances around the American Club pool with his Bose dock and iPod and walks into dinner parties in character. Recently, it was Stevie Wonder, sunglasses on, head swaying and singing the first few bars of "I Just Called To Say I Love You" before segueing into a riff of one liners about the guests' attire.

TJ comes into new friendships right in the middle, skipping over the small talk and jumping straight into the comfort zone. This chatty, fearless risk-taker is a refreshing out-of-the-box expat completely oblivious to boundaries and fully engaged in the game of life. He

asks questions, studies people and says just about anything that comes to his mind. Self-editing isn't a part of this guy's wiring.

"That's what I like about TJ, he's bold and he's real," says friend Shazz Simpson, who works in events management.

TJ arrived in Singapore last summer from California with his wife Sandi and daughter Ava, when Sandi, an executive with a large software company, was transferred here. As the trailing spouse, he came without a job.

As he got his bearings, he spent a few months coaching basketball at the Anglo Chinese School and continued doing what has always come naturally to him — networking and making friends. One person he met was life coach Ellie Campbell. After just one session with her, it was as if he

had absorbed the wisdom of every self-help book on the planet. He found direction and the phone hasn't stopped ringing since.

Now he has an agent who moonlights as a clown, an illegal iPhone (who doesn't) full of important numbers, and a weekly open-mic comedy gig called *Get Real Thursdays with TJ* at a cozy bar called the Hideout on Circular Road. Andre Chalson, Hideout's managing partner, was so impressed with TJ's razor-sharp wit after one meeting, he hired him on the spot.

TJ recently bagged a comedy show at the American Club's Union Bar, and he continues doing one-off MC jobs for parties at five-star hotels. Hustling for jobs is part of being an entertainer and everyone knows the best gig is always just around the corner.

A self-professed class clown, he's spent a lifetime being funny. In the 1990s, TJ lived the Hollywood life, writing comedy sketches for a popular US television series,

"You can pick your nose in Singapore
but you can't pick your teeth, why is that?"

— TJ