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Mind Games

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Mind Games

Mentalist Chris Carter '87 is out to mess with your brains.

Story by Sarah Zeller '07

Photos by Marc Featherly



Carter and Colleen Caplice '09 celebrate the results of her spoon-bending efforts.

table, or I'll know right away."

After she's folded up the name, Carter turns back and begins a barrage of questions: Is the name on the paper that of a male or female? Is it a friend? Does she attend school here?

Finally, Carter smiles. "Next time you talk to Ellen," he says, as the students at the table react in shock, "tell her I read your mind."

It was exactly for performing such feats that Carter was named *Campus Activities Magazine's* "Performing Arts Entertainer of the Year" in 2005. It's the same reason he was invited to perform at the Hansen Student Center — his second such appearance — in conjunction with the center's fifth-anniversary celebration in January. Carter now performs about 230 shows a year, most of them at colleges, making him perhaps the busiest college entertainer in America. He has performed in all 50 states, with upcoming shows in Alaska and Puerto Rico. "I'm just a big ping-pong ball," he jokes.

Besides his apparent mind-reading abilities, Carter's shows include his mastery of magic and hypnosis. "I've taken a wide variety of skills and mixed them up," he says. "Most of what I do, I invented."

A few hours before his show at the Hansen Student Center, Chris Carter '87 is already at work. After baffling the dinner crowd in the Bertholf Commons, he now catches the attention of a group of female friends finishing their burgers and fries in Tommy's, the lower-level eatery inside Hansen.

"Write down the name of someone you know," he instructs one of the women, handing her a piece of paper. Carter turns away and tightly shuts his eyes. "But make sure it isn't someone sitting at this

Carter does not claim his powers come from ESP or other psychic abilities. Instead, he calls himself a mentalist. “It’s a very old-fashioned term,” he says. “I use it because it conveys that what I do has to do with mind stuff.”

His interest in mind reading and magic began at as a child. As he watched his uncle playing poker with his friends, Carter realized that he could tell when a man was bluffing. With more practice and the help of a book about body language his mother bought him, Carter learned to guess what cards each person was holding. When he began showing people this trick, “the reaction was more powerful” than he had ever experienced with traditional magic tricks.



After donning a blindfold and duct tape, Carter accurately names objects that students randomly pull from their pockets.

“From that point on,” he says, “I pretty much knew what I wanted to do.”

Carter, who grew up in Springfield, Ill., came to Illinois Wesleyan intending to be a psychology major but later switched to theatre and business, knowing both majors would be helpful in his future career. Carter also honed his skills as a hypnotist at IWU.

He spent four more years in graduate school studying theatre, but left before completing his dissertation to devote himself to the task of becoming a full-time mentalist. Carter’s first two years — performing at private parties and small corporate events in the Chicago area — were lean. But when he discovered the college market, “I knew that I had found a home for my performing,” he says.

After several years focused on the college market, Carter has begun adding corporate events back into his busy schedule. While custom-tailoring each show to suit the needs of specific clients, Carter’s basic message at those events is to encourage people to imagine beyond the boundaries of what they are accustomed to think is possible.

For college students who tend to be less stuck in such mental ruts, Carter has a simpler goal: “I just want to freak them out,” he says.



Carter enlisted a student helper who shuffled a pile of folders marked with letters, and then randomly chose seven from that pile to give to seven students onstage. Then the helper was instructed to pick a number at random from a Chicago phone book. After that, the students revealed their folders' contents: a sheet of paper, each showing a number that exactly coincided with the digits and order of the chosen phone number.

shoe, a toothbrush still in the package, and a half-eaten pack of candy.

How does he do it? According to Carter, his method is a mix of many different approaches, including applied psychology, illusion, and reading body language — what he calls “sleight of brain, instead of sleight of hand.”

Carter says he enjoys having skeptical audience members at his shows, since he considers himself to be a skeptic, albeit one who believes “we can perceive more accurately on a subconscious level.”

But that alone won't explain several of Carter's mind-bending tricks. In one, he picks two students from his Hansen Center audience, invites them onstage, gives each a light tube to hold, and then asks for the house lights to be turned down. In less than five minutes, after hypnotizing both students, Carter instructs them to look at the tubes and turn them on with their minds. Suddenly, the tubes begin to glow in the dark.

For Carter, it's all in a day's work. “I just want to mess with your head,” he tells the audience when he first walks onstage — and it's clear by the perplexed, wondering looks on their faces that he has once again accomplished his life's mission.

Carter starts his Hansen performance by having audience members try to guess the three-digit number he's thinking of. When he finds a student who has guessed the same number he has written down, she comes onstage — and finds that Carter has already predicted that she would be the one to guess correctly. In a tape-recorded message Carter gave to Assistant Dean of Students Kevin Clark several hours earlier when he first arrived on campus, the performer spells out exactly what the student is wearing and even the color of her hair. The crowd erupts in disbelief as the message is played.

Carter's next amazing feat is performed without the benefit of sight. Having duct-taped silver dollars to his eyes, and taping a blindfold over the top, Carter has volunteers randomly collect objects from the audience's pockets and purses, all of which he correctly guesses without touching them. By asking the owners of the objects a few questions, he's able to tell the audience that the objects are a