

TRANSCRIPT
JACOB AGAI: A MAN WITH A WILL WHO FINDS A WAY

SUNNI BEAN: Jacob Agui lives in one of those incredibly tall skyscrapers off Central Park.

He's a property developer. A successful one. He's on the 68th floor. I read online that until recently, P.Diddy was living two floors below him.

(sound of dialing up)

My ears pop on the ride up.

Jacob's on his way in the door too. That means taking off his prosthetic.

[So do me a favor just turn around--because I did do to me to--let me just turn around and raise one foot at a time.](#)

Normally, Jacob's always hosting. But since he lost his leg after severe burns in 2020, he's vigilant about his health.

Still, he made sure his aid got me the best chocolate babka before the chat.

[just wanted to get another one in cinnamon not knowing which one you like. but he called me, they only had black, a chocolate so I said okay, okay, good chocolate. So that's it.](#)

He loves the babka from this bakery, but this is the first time he's actually had some himself in years.

[I've been going there for five, six years, and I buy these many times. And this is the first time that it's here in the house because of you every time I give it to somebody.](#)

I'm SUNNI BEAN and this is Onomatopoeia- a podcast about the people and places of New York City. On this episode, a man with a will, who finds a way.

SBOne thing I've learned about Jacob is he loves to give gifts. Big gifts. Sometimes over the top. And if he wants to give one, he will find a way.

He has a giant of a heart. He tries to help everybody. And yes, he gets into mischief.

That's his sister, Hedy. There was no doubt he'd fly the 5000 miles to her son's bar mitzvah with a big stack of goodies. That's classic Jacob. But she didn't know the gift her son was expecting.

HI: Unknown to me, he was campaigning with his uncle to get him to totally once his Bar Mitzvah is a Playboy magazine, and mom won't get okay.

So then we are in the backyard the day after the bar mitzvah, and we're having a big barbecue for the family and friends from out of town. And Jacob comes in and he gives them an envelope. And he says, Here's your Bar Mitzvah present

He opens a manila envelope and stuff. And he goes, Oh, my God, look what Uncle Jake got when he picks it up, and it's a Playboy magazine. And I'm dying. I'm like, How could you? I told you, no.

SB: He'd found the loophole.

HI: So he opens it up. It starts going through the pages. And he goes, What's going on? So what's wrong?

SB Jacob had hired an artist to paint over every naked woman in the magazine.

HI: Whether it was a gown or a bathing suit, whatever. Every photo in the magazine is one of a kind and my son owns it was covered in the Playboy magazine.

SUNNI BEAN:

Today, We sit down at a long wooden table with papers pushed to the side. We're surrounded by floor to ceiling windows giving a 360 view of New York. Jacob's in a polo and sneakers.

Jacob believes in the power of the mind. That we can will things. If we have the right mindset. Our unconscious will take it from there. He's done it before, as a kid in Israel.

Jacob was born in Israel in 1944, before it was a state. As a teenager, he had severe asthma.

At 16, he was big and strong.

JA: Yet, they used to literally carry me off the field to get my medication it really bothered me

SB: What bothered him most was how much the medication helped.

JA: And I realized without it I cannot really exist.
And I said I have to fight it off.

SB: Jacob's a big person. He hates to feel small. He remembers one nurse

JA: I couldn't take it; Here I am, almost the prime of my life and she's looking with me with sorrow.

SB: And his asthma was getting worse.

JA: Not even one day passed without me having one to three attacks.

SB: So he said to himself, the day he arrives in America, asthma will leave him.

I And it did. When he arrived in America, he never had an asthma attack again.

He had the same attitude with his amputation last year.

JA: I got burned. Very badly with my leg.

SB: When he tells people who don't know already, he tells them:

JA: I told them, I tell you, I'll tell you something, what's happening? But in no way. Do I want to hear that you feeling sorry for me, then I'll tell you. And I overcome it. You know, and I overcame the asthma.

SB: He tried to will himself to heal again, to save his leg.

SB: There was a prominent surgeon in charge of the division that told him he doesn't think it could be saved. And they had to think about amputation. But Jacob wanted to see if he could make it work first.

JA: And I explained to him my life, I explained to him two times where I will certain things and they happen. I said, Give me a chance, don't amputate me right away. Let's see if my body will heal.

SB: He came back, to tell Jacob he had touched him. But in the end, the doctor determined. Dead is dead. So instead, Jacob decided, the first thing he would do when he could walk again was dance Tango. He told his ex-wife, still a close friend.

JA: She said 'Jacob, that was your favorite dance. You dance the tango.' And I said, yeah, now at this stage in my life I want to learn the Argentinian style, which is the most sexy one.

SB: Sometimes, Jacob's ability to go for the sexy side of life means a willful blindness to that which makes him feel small. He hasn't been interested in getting involved in the amputee community.

JA: My son has been fighting me very hard to join the amputee coalition. And I don't. I say I would not feel comfortable to be in the presence of many people who are amputees. I don't. Almost to the point where I deny the fact that I am an amputee. I don't like to see other people's suffering, that does not help me. And it doesn't mean I don't empathize with people or without help people.

SB: I Part of Jacob's strength is his ability to accept complexity. And look at hard truths. He's spent years* in all kinds of therapy. And he's reached a point where he has no issue that anybody knows the good and the bad.

JA: I don't want to be dependent on anything. And anybody, my whole purpose for me, when I worked in my career, was that I would not be dependent on people. When I get older, You know, for me with money. What it serves is to give me freedom for me. And that's it. I don't like dependency.

SUNNI BEAN

When I returned a second time to Jacob, he motioned me towards a brown bag by the door for me. It had a big shabbat challah, five olive breadsticks, burechas, almond croissant, almond chocolate croissant, a regular croissant, a cinnamon roll, and a chocolate babka.

They don't make cinnamon again until January. He promised me one then.

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