

An actor's story

THE HIGHS AND UNBELIEVABLE LOWS OF ACTING

"This city can suck every emotion out of you and make you do things that you never thought you would do. If you're not mentally prepared, you should stay wherever you are. L.A. is the type of city that can drain you."

Rodney Van Johnson, Ed '85, speaks from experience. When he came to L.A. five years ago, he did things he never thought he'd do. The determination he had learned from his UC mentors is what kept him balanced enough to handle the upcoming nightmare.

Rodney arrived on the West Coast with high expectations after developing a successful acting career in Florida, where he led a rather cushy lifestyle from filming national commercials for seven years. What greeted him in L.A. were volatile relationships, lack of work and an exorbitant cost of living, all of which left him virtually homeless, sleeping in his car

and showering at the YMCA.

"I was doing auditions, and everyone thought life was great. They didn't know I was living in my car. I'm not proud of it," he admits, "but I did that for a couple months."

Life is good now. Having appeared in TV shows like "Grace Under Fire" and "The Jamie Foxx Show" last season, he currently has a regular role in a new syndicated TV show "Pensacola: Wings of Gold."

"It's a whole different world out here," he says. "A lot of sacrifices have to be made. But for me, it was worth it. I see a lot of things happening right now."

Success in the film industry gets down to three points, he says: "It's definitely who you know, how com-

mitted you are and how hard you work, in that order. You could be one of the most talented people in the world and never work."

When he was new in town, he fell into that dangerous position of not knowing the right people. Luckily, he had the commitment to work hard and the willingness to persevere.

That mental attitude was one of the things he developed at UC as a member of UC's track team. "Coach Bill Schnier taught me to be a very goal-oriented person," he says, "and that has really stuck with me."

The coach insisted that the student give him a measurable goal when he joined the team. "Being the mouth that I am, I said I wanted to break school records," he remembers. "I didn't know how much trouble I was getting myself into, but I ended up breaking all kinds of school records and qualifying for the Olympic trials."

"That's something I carried with me when I came out here. It's just a lot of hard work and persistence trying to get what you want in this business."

Rodney was an education major who taught briefly, but was lured into sales by a salary that doubled his income. He then made a rash decision to move to Florida during an 8-inch snowstorm that immobilized Cincinnati.

He was working in a sales position at a TV station in Florida when clients asked him to appear in a commercial. Rodney's dimpled face was exactly what Kentucky Fried Chicken wanted. So did Buick, McDonald's, Olive Garden and Blue Cross/Blue Shield.



photo courtesy/Eyemark

PROFILE



RODNEY VAN JOHNSON

Partial credits: "The Jamie Foxx Show," "Grace Under Fire," "Babylon 5."

Most recent credit: Regular role in new syndicated TV show "Pensacola: Wings of Gold" (pictured above).

Inspiration: Sidney Poitier in "To Sir With Love," which made him cry as a child, but also made him want to be an actor.

Memorable quote: "The things you read in those gossip columns are 80 percent true. The alien stuff is fabrication, but the majority is true."

UC records he still holds: high jump, 7' 3"; 100 meter in 10.2 seconds; 55 meter indoors in 6.1 seconds; 1,600 relay team, 3.09.93.