



Leonardo Washington: Dallas' Next Level

## IN DALLAS, LEONARDO PAINTS HIS MASTERPIECE

By Stu Kearns

**Dallas, Texas** — Leonardo Washington gives credit for his success to hard work, studying his craft, heavy research, and one other key factor.

"We treat people like people," says Leonardo, owner of Next Level Entertainment. "We talk to them and not at them. We treat every event with a personal touch, and we believe that clients deserve an experience like no other on the most important night of their lives."

Leonardo, a native of Monroe, La., showed a passion for music, like so many DJs, at an early age. He started on the trumpet, moved over to the French horn, and was good enough to earn a place on Grambling State University Tiger Marching Band.

He started Next Level Entertainment in Atlanta, in 2001, after finding inspiration at a friend's wedding. The DJ, Lorenzo "The Jam Man – King of Old School" Brown – was working the crowd, and Leo went up to the booth and said hello. Asked some questions. Looked at his music. He had never seen anyone command a crowd like that.

Right away, he was hooked, and when he started Next Level, it was a new company faced with the same challenges of so many other startups: "I was a new company that just entered the DJ market," he says. "I had to come up with strategies to compete with people that are already in the market. How would I get people to recognize Next

Level Entertainment?

That's where the hard work came in — exceptional customer service and providing a performance as near to amazing every time. Easy to say — tough to do.

How do you get to "amazing"? Says Leonardo, "Communication with the couple. You have to make them feel comfortable by gaining their trust that you are going to make this once-in-a-lifetime, sensational moment special and all about them. It starts with your introduction of the couple. You have to captivate the crowd by saying something, finding that sweet spot of being stern and welcoming to ensure that all eyes and attention is on this once-in-a-lifetime moment."

Of course, the first step to "amazing" is achieved via the microphone. "Initially, right out of the gate, what you say in the first 20 seconds, how you control the room, how you grasp their attention, is crucial to the guests accepting you. You're in charge, and you need to get them to buy into your plan for execution. If they don't stop and listen, you have started your night on a rocky path. You have to get their attention and respect immediately."

Leonardo says much of that is reliant upon appearance. "Not only do you have to be the part, you have to dress the part as well," he says. "You must be polished, articulate, and have something to say when you turn on that microphone."

Next Level, a solo op — "the reason being is because Leonardo has to paint the masterpiece at your reception himself" — books about 60-75 gigs a year, and subs out the overflow. "We found this charismatic entertainer from Florida, Randy Sent-

er, also known as The Mouth from The South," says Leonardo. "Randy meets the standards that make Next Level unique and different."

On the gear tip, a typical Next Level system will include: a Pioneer DJ DDJ-SX2 4-channel Serato controller; Shure wireless mics; an RCF EVOX 12 active, 2-way/array loudspeaker system; and various lighting products from ADJ, Elation, Eternal Lighting, Chauvet DJ and Mega-Lite.

A few years ago, Leonardo made the move to Dallas, and having learned from his first experience in Atlanta, was better prepared for the startup challenges. "The Dallas market is filled with a lot of talented DJs," he says. "A lot of them are well-equipped with lights and toys. We try to sell ourselves on knowing what to do, what to play, what to say at the right time and for the right audience as well. Every event is different, and you have to have the right experience. It's about understanding the true needs of your customer. You have to get to know them on a personal level. What are their likes and dislikes? You have to understand their vision and how you can help turn it into a stunning reality."

In the future, Leonardo hopes to further entrench Next Level Entertainment in the Dallas market. "I want to continue to be a trendsetter and a difference-maker in the state of Texas, to change the mentality of what a DJ is from one event to another," he says. "We are going to continue to find different ways to create an exciting experience at weddings that people will tell their friends about."

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