

It's just past eight on a Saturday morning, and a flock of jewelry store sales managers has descended on an auditorium in Greensboro's swanky Grandover Resort and Conference Center. They're here for the same reason anybody would be here on a Saturday morning: They have to be.

Their waking is made easier by two stimulants: coffee, which is hot, and Nido **Qubein**, who is getting warmer by the minute.

Dressed in a custom-made slate blue suit, his pewter hair bearing the tracks of his comb, **Qubein** works the crowd like a lawyer. It's a tough room, partly because of its amphitheater layout, which has the sales managers sitting behind long rows of desks. **Qubein** goes straight for the first row, leaning over the desks, climbing the stairs in between, gesturing and pausing, his voice rising and falling to tack down his points.

How to increase sales. That's what management has hired **Qubein** to talk about, though you'd hardly know it from his content, which is heavy on my-Lebanese-mama-done-told-me advice, dunked in humor.

Hear the one about Jack? He just got married for the eighth time. He claims bad luck with women. Wedding guests got bumper stickers that said, "Honk if you've been married to Jack."

The crowd is loosened up now, nodding at his points about personal excellence and service, hooting at his jokes, some of which poke gentle fun at Baptists, a tricky game here in the Bible belt, but **Qubein** makes it work. Soon, a guy in the back is giving **Qubein**, who has been a Methodist for 25 years, an "Amen, brother!" every time he agrees.

An hour and twenty minutes after he started, **Qubein** retires, walking an aisle of applause as the crowd rises in a standing ovation.

This is how **Qubein**, who lives and works in High Point, has become the Furniture City's own Zig Ziglar, literally talking himself into a successful career as a motivational business speaker, one who is nationally known among the corporate keynote crowd.

"We represent hundreds of speakers, and he's in the upper crust of things, not just because he has a great reputation. He tells great stories. He has a presence. He inspires an audience. He's a class act," says Steve Ruskin, vice president of Eagles Talent Connection in South Orange, N.J.

That's not to say that **Qubein** is a stranger in his adopted hometown of High Point. His resume is plastered with past chairmanships of local nonprofits, and he's well-known for generating money - either from his own pocket or from the pockets of other people whom he calls on as a fund-raiser.

A college scholarship fund that **Qubein** started 30 years ago has handed out \$2 million to more than 500 students, most of them in the High Point area.

His annual Thanksgiving luncheon for Rotary clubs is a hot ticket in High Point, drawing more than 500 people every year with its patriotic program. In past years, **Qubein**, who picks up the tab for the whole shebang, has brought in friends including Casey Kasem, Art Linkletter and the late Norman Vincent Peale as speakers. This year's featured performer is Lee "God Bless the USA" Greenwood.

Qubein's name is also tied to high-profile events, such as the Miss North Carolina USA pageant and its companion contest for teens. High Point has hosted the event for the last three years. thanks to **Qubein**'s pull as pageant chairman. Every year, the contests have pumped at least \$300,000 into the local economy, according to the High Point Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Next year, **Qubein** could affect local lives even more. He's a good bet for chairman of the board of the High Point Community Foundation, when the vote is taken next month. He's also a leading candidate to be the

next chairman of the board of trustees at High Point University, his alma mater, when the job comes open next year.

In an age when many Arab Americans draw a wary eye, the 55-year-old **Qubein**, who immigrated from Jordan when he was 17, draws near-uniform praise in a community that views him as one of their own.

"I know he immigrated here, but a lot of people here perceive him as a hometown boy," says Jim Noble, owner of restaurant J Basul Noble in High Point and a friend of **Qubein**.

So how it is that a guy whose name people rarely say right the first time (it's KNEE-dough coo-BANE) - a guy whose accent turns cholesterol into "cholossterol"; a guy who gropes for the name of the movie starring Dorothy, Toto and the Tin Man - is so accepted?

It's fodder for a book. Maybe 20. That's about how many self-help books **Qubein** has written. He has lost exact count. His videos? More than 100. Audio tapes? More than 200. No matter the medium, most of his materials rely on this hook:

Look at me. If I can make it in America, anyone can.

"They know I must know the system because I made the journey. I came across the bridge," **Qubein** says. "Not only did come across the bridge, I built the bridge."

The first step in bridge construction, he tells people, is to know what you want. For **Qubein**, the goal was simple when he came to this country: He wanted to be a millionaire.

"Of course! That's what America is all about!" he says. "You don't come to America to check out the trees and go to McDonald's."

Hence, his one-way plane to - in his warp-speed words - "thelandofthefreeandthehome ofthebrave."

Coming here was his mother's idea. Victoria **Qubein** thought the youngest of her five children would do well in America. The family was Christian, and they viewed America as the land of opportunity.

At first, **Qubein** didn't like the idea of leaving home, but he demurred to his mother, whom he often cites as the strongest influence in his young life. His father, Raji, suffered a stroke when **Qubein** was a preschooler and died when he was 6. The next-oldest child was 11 years older than **Qubein**, so for many years, it was just **Qubein** and his mother living in an apartment in Amman, Jordan. She worked as a seamstress while he went to school.

When it came time for college, **Qubein** picked a familiar name: Mount Olive College in Mount Olive. The name reminded him of the biblical Mount of Olives, where Jesus went to pray. He applied to the small Baptist college and was accepted.

The year was 1966, and Mount Olive - the pickle capital of North Carolina, thanks to the cucumbers grown in the area - was not exactly cosmopolitan. **Qubein** knew no other foreign students on campus. Yet, he says, he always felt welcome.

That he was Christian - born of a Greek Orthodox mother and an Episcopalian father - probably helped. His enthusiasm for making it in this country didn't hurt either.

"I used the right premise: That in America, if you are willing to work hard enough and smart enough, there are many opportunities here," he says.

To tap those opportunities, he dedicated himself to learning English. Every day he wrote a word on a 3-by-5 index card and memorized the definition and pronunciation. Today, **Qubein** speaks English more fluently, and with better grammar, than most Americans.

Another pier of his bridge was work. **Qubein**, who landed in this country with \$50 in his pocket, had no choice. He was paying for his education. He washed dishes in the school cafeteria - "That lasted about three

days" - and sorted books in the library. "I screwed up the stacks, all the books. Gave that up."

Ironically, his successes came in communication. The local newspaper paid him \$4 a week to write a column about campus activities. Another source of income was speaking. The college president took **Qubein** to churches that financially supported the college.

Church people ate up **Qubein's** remembrances of the Holy Land and his anecdotes about adjusting to American life. One vignette, which he still uses in speeches, recounts the time he went to buy pajamas and was confused by a label that read "shrink resistant." A sales lady told him, "Sir, that means they will shrink. But they don't want to."

Never underestimate the power of the catalog.

Qubein found Mount Olive College in one. He found Camp Cheerio in another. The summer camp, which is owned by the High Point YMCA, was hiring counselors when **Qubein** was at Mount Olive. The job description was a dream to **Qubein**, who couldn't afford to go home in the summers. "Being in a camp where you could live and work and eat - that was cool," he says.

It was a YMCA official who suggested that he come to High Point when he finished at Mount Olive, a two-year school. **Qubein** took the nudge and continued his education at High Point University, then called High Point College. He also continued speaking in churches and working with youth.

One of his first jobs was as a youth leader at Emmanuel Lutheran Church. The church gave him more than an income. It gave him contacts, including Bill Horney, the owner of Mirro Products, a High Point company that makes in-store signs and displays.

Qubein's mother had drilled this maxim into her son's head: If you want to be successful, hang around successful people.

Horney, a civic leader who is more than 30 years **Qubein's** senior, was just the kind of guy that **Qubein** wanted to spend time with. At the same time, Horney was glad to nurture the young man, whom he recognized as a go-getter.

"I introduced him to some other people," says the 87-year-old Horney. "People liked him. He was so enthusiastic."

Qubein's enthusiasm carried him into graduate school at UNCG's school of business, even though he didn't have the entrance exam scores to get in. "My GRE grades were pitifully low," says **Qubein**. "I was totally rejected."

Once again, words came to his rescue. He talked the business school dean into accepting him on the condition that he made good grades. A year later, he graduated with mostly A's, he says.

He reminded business school brass of his rejection a few years ago when he accepted their first distinguished alumni award.

"They forgot the story!" **Qubein** says.

To some people, much of **Qubein's** advice might seem like common sense. One of his most recent books, "How to Get Anything You Want," a reprise of an earlier book, contains instructions such as "Master Your Emotions; Don't Let Them Master You," "Adopt a Positive Mental Attitude and Seek Out Positive People" and "Give Everything You Do Everything You've Got."

His talks urge listeners to lead balanced lives, to develop goals consistent with their values, to concentrate on behaviors that get them closer to their goals and to ditch behaviors that don't.

When it comes to selling, **Qubein's** mantra is to make an emotional connection with customers. "Facts tell, emotions sell," he tells his audiences. "No one wants to buy your product. They want to buy the product of your product."

Qubein admits that much of what he says is common sense.

"If I would speak to you about something that's unfamiliar to you, you would tune me out," he says. "I take what you know and expand it. I move the walls. I show you how it connects to other dimensions."

He swears by the reactions of his audiences. It's common, he says, for people to tell him that his talks - and his more intense management-consulting sessions - have profoundly touched their lives.

Sure enough, says Werner Mantay, president of Eberspaecher North America, a company that makes exhaust systems for the auto industry. Recently, Eberspaecher hired **Qubein** to coach three up-and-coming managers in Novi, Mich. He's been talking about beliefs that lead to behaviors that are good for business.

"There's been extraordinary personal revelation for all three of the individuals involved," Mantay says.

So why, with thousands of business consultants trolling the corporate waters, did Eberspaecher pick **Qubein** for the job? First, because he communicates clearly, says Mantay, and second, because he's a businessman himself.

Qubein would call that positioning. Now, he sells himself as a businessman who happens to write and speak. In the early stages of his career, however, it was nearly the reverse.

His first venture was a newsletter called Adventures with Youth. Inspired by **Qubein's** own frustrations as a youth leader, the publication gave activities and advice on leading young people.

Qubein saw profit at the end of his first year. His fortunes got another boost when subscribers asked him to speak to their groups about leading youth.

"Every time I spoke, someone else would see me, and like me, and want me to come speak to their group," he says.

It was a short hop to motivational speaking. Americans, **Qubein** was learning, had a strong appetite for advice, and they were willing to shell out big bucks for it.

"People in a free-enterprise, capitalistic society are more open to finding ways to increase their lot in life, improve themselves" he says. "It's in our psyche."

Adventures with Youth is long gone, but **Qubein** runs its descendant, Creative Services, his speaking, writing and consulting business. He's also chairman and part-owner of two other local businesses: McNeill Lehman, a public relations firm in High Point, and Business Life Inc., which publishes "bizlife," a Triad magazine.

His interests reach beyond communications. He's chairman of Great Harvest Bread Co., a Montana-based bakery chain that he bought with other investors in 2001. He's also a major shareholder in BB&T Corp., courtesy of a local bank he started with other businessmen in 1985. American Bank & Trust was bought by Southern National Bank, which later merged with BB&T.

Qubein's various holdings have made him a millionaire several times over. His speeches to business groups alone reap \$12,500 to \$20,000 a pop. More than 20 business clients pay him \$7,000 a year to talk to him on the phone for 30 minutes a month. In December, 20 people will attend a three-day seminar that **Qubein** puts on in High Point; each has paid \$12,600 for the privilege.

Qubein enjoys the trappings of success: world travel, a huge home in the country club section of High Point, custom-made suits, \$1,500 cuff links. He once slipped a \$40,000 diamond ring on his wife Mariana's finger during church, when they joined hands to pray.

"It expressed how I feel, which is a spiritual love or commitment," he says.

He rarely lets an audience go without talking about spirituality. Success, he tells them, is secular. He urges them to shoot for significance, which he says is spiritual and requires helping other people.

Qubein has put his money where his money-making mouth is. He and his family have given almost \$2 million to the High Point Community Foundation. They have sunk slightly more than \$1 million into endowed scholarships at High Point University, Mount Olive College and UNC-Chapel Hill.

Qubein also supports a scholarship fund that bears his name: the Nido**Qubein** and Associates Scholarship Foundation.

He started the fund in 1972, as soon as he launched his first business, to fulfill an earlier promise. When **Qubein** graduated from Mount Olive, the college president told him that, contrary to what **Qubein** thought, he had not paid his own way through college. An anonymous benefactor had helped.

"I made a commitment to God on that day, that as soon as I started to work, someday, I would do something to help young people go to college," **Qubein** says.

He continues his philanthropy, says his wife, Mariana, because he feels blessed.

"He was a nobody, and a lot of people reached out to him," she says.

Qubein is savvy about business, but there's a quality about him that's almost unbusinesslike, especially against the backdrop of America's staid corporate culture: That would be hand-flapping gusto for matters large and small.

"People always wonder about that," says his daughter Deena, a junior at UNC-Chapel Hill. "They wonder if it's an act, but it's really not. He's like that when we go to church on Sunday morning; he's like that when he comes to our (athletic) games; he's like that when he comes home; he's like that when we go on family trips."

Qubein's wife confirms: "He's the generator in this house. If he sees you down, he tries to pick you up. He goes right to the source of whatever's causing you to be worried."

Qubein's knack for advising extends to the family dinner table, where he loves to give mini-lessons on life - "Sometimes the kids hate it, but they like it later on," Mariana **Qubein** says - and to his friends.

A week seldom goes by that **Qubein** doesn't call or mail a book or newspaper article to Paul Lessard, executive director of the High Point Community Foundation.

"I know that I'm on his mind weekly, which is amazing to me, because I know what his travel schedule is like," says Lessard.

One of the few times that friends have seen **Qubein** down was when his wife was diagnosed with breast cancer six years ago. "That was the only time I've seen Nido when he didn't have it together," says his longtime friend Bill Horney. "He was so sad."

More than five years after her surgery, Mariana **Qubein** is considered cured. **Qubein**, the father of four, says the experience made him a better person and a better speaker.

"There's no question that I came out of it a more caring person, better equipped to connect to audiences about the pain in their lives," he says.

His audiences range from small groups of managers to hundreds of people at conventions or seminars such as the one **Qubein** attended in Los Angeles few weeks ago. There, he shared the bill with Stedman Graham (Oprah Winfrey's flame) and Mark Victor Hansen (of "Chicken Soup for the Soul" fame) as they advised people on how to become successful professional speakers.

The majority of **Qubein's** dates are out of town, but he promises faithful attendance should he take on leadership of the boards of High Point University and the Community Foundation.

He would like to see both organizations expand. The Community Foundation could use a broader base of donors, he says, and he'd like to see his alma mater offer students more opportunities to present themselves

publicly. Guidance for budding entrepreneurs would be OK, too.

Then more students would have a chance to make it as **Qubein** did. And would do again, he says.

"You could take it all away and put me on the street," he says, "and I'd find something to do, and do it all over again."

He probably won't have to.

At the end of **Qubein's** speech at Grandover, the jewelry store chairman hands him two \$500 gift certificates for his two daughters, one of whom accompanies him. Moments later, the chairman is gone, but **Qubein** is still glowing.

Two women who attended his talk come into view. **Qubein** corrals them, asking which store they work in. Winston-Salem, they say. "I gotta check it out," **Qubein** says. "You know why? Huh? 'Cause I got the doooooough!"

He's playfully waving the gift certificates in their faces now. "When you're hot, you're hot! That's all there is to it!"

He's laughing. The women are laughing. **Qubein's** daughter Deena looks slightly embarrassed, but she's laughing, too.

The chit-chat goes on for a minute, then the saleswomen leave. As they disappear down the hall, one calls out to **Qubein** over her shoulder.

"We already told them we want you again!"

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