

Handling big weddings with cool moxie

BY FRANK LOVECE
Special to Newsday

Eisenhower had it easy — he only had to plan D-Day. But an upscale wedding with elaborate food and flowers, and the gown, plus the music and the officiant and there's always *somebody* who wants doves and . . .

And that's when you call a wedding planner. In fact, if you're a 1-percenter or even a measly 10-percenter, you may find yourself calling Babylon-based Michael Russo Events. Or you would if you had the phone number, since the firm doesn't advertise and only has an email link on its website. Even once you get through, Mikie Russo may or may not accept you for one of the six major events he limits himself to each year.

But now with FYI's new show "Mikie Saves the Date," premiering tomorrow at 10 p.m., regular Joes and Janes have a chance of obtaining his services. A slim chance, but a chance, nonetheless. The show's producer, High Noon Entertainment (TLC's "Cake Boss") screened "thousands of submission videos," Russo says, for the pilot that aired Aug. 26 and the upcoming eight-episode season. Russo made the final choices.

"I know right off the bat who I would love to work with and who I know is doing it for another reason, like just to be on TV," says the effervescent event planner, 35, who was born and raised in Smithtown. "I really picked the couples that I had that immediate reaction to. I knew they wanted my help genuinely."

Not that it comes cheap: The husband-and-wife-to-be still have to kick in. "Most of their budgets were \$20,000 to \$40,000," Russo says. "For me to walk through the door is \$100,000. So they're getting a discount. A major discount!"

Seeing him in action, it does look as if they get their money's worth. Russo handles nervous brides and difficult parents with aplomb, using everything from reflective questions to mock outrage with surgical skill, giving viewers a small course not only in wedding planning but also in management psychology.

The son of a housewife, Rosemary, and a retired contractor,



L.I. event planner Michael Russo solves problems using celebrity wedding expertise in "Mikie Saves the Date." ■ **Video:** newsday.com/tv ■ **Photo gallery of Russo's own wedding:** newsday.com/weddings

Frank, with family roots in Sicily, Russo began his career more than 10 years ago at James Cress Florist in Smithtown, working with brides-to-be, and made his mark in July 2004 planning the Oheka Castle wedding of former Sen. Alfonse D'Amato. Two months later, Russo became a celebrity wedding planner almost overnight with the marriage of 'N Sync singer Joey Fatone and Kelly Baldwin, also at Oheka.

The high-profile gig came about through Russo's boyfriend and now husband, publicist Richard Piana, "who's known Joey since kindergarten," Russo says. "Literally the next day, 'Entertainment Tonight' called wanting to interview me." With the national exposure, Russo and Baldwin started Glen Cove-based Roses n Lollipops.

"I had the company with Kelly for a year, year-and-a-half, and became very busy very quickly,"

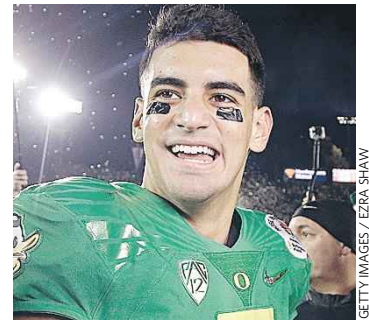
Russo says. When Baldwin became even busier with a young daughter, "Kelly said, 'Ya know what, let me sell the company to you for a dollar.'" He incorporated it in 2007 and reincorporated as Michael Russo Events in 2011. By then, he had done Kevin Jonas' wedding, as well as parties for Kathy Griffin and Shaquille O'Neal. A year later, he got screen time planning a wedding for CMT's "My Big Redneck Vacation."

He'd been approached often to do his own reality series, he says, "but it was never the right fit, because most of the programming everyone was after was manufactured drama. Then, when I met with High Noon, they understood what I was after in terms of having a positive nature. Then I met FYI and I fell in love."

And isn't that how all good marriages start?

today'spicks

COLLEGE FOOTBALL (8:30 p.m., ESPN) — Heisman Trophy winner Marcus Mariota and the No. 2 Oregon Ducks meet No. 4 Ohio State Buckeyes to decide the first-ever College Football Playoff National Championship.



Marcus Mariota leads the Oregon Ducks against Ohio State tonight.

EYE CANDY (10 p.m., MTV) — Premiere: R.L.

Stine's story of a hacker sleuth becomes a grown-up thriller for Victoria Justice (Nick's "Victorious").

INDEPENDENT LENS (10 p.m., WNET/13) — In "Evolution of a Criminal," filmmaker Darius Clark Monroe returns to his Texas hometown to try to determine why he robbed a bank as a teenager.

offthewall

LONG-LIVED OSCAR WINNER Luise Rainer was born in 1910, won back-to-back Academy Awards in 1936 and 1937, and died Dec. 30, 2014, at age 104.



Luise Rainer's film career is honored today on TCM.

But not before chatting with Robert Osborne in "Luise Rainer: Live From the TCM Classic Film Festival" (7:30 p.m., TCM). The 2011 interview wraps a full day of seven of her films, starting with 6 a.m.'s "The Great Ziegfeld" and including "The Good Earth" at noon. More at tcm.com

— DIANE WERTS

tvtalk

DAYTIME

TODAY (7 a.m., NBC/4) — Casey Wilson

KELLY & MICHAEL (9 a.m., WABC/7) — Patricia Heaton

QUEEN LATIFAH (9 a.m., WCBS/2) — Chris O'Donnell

RACHAEL RAY (10 a.m., WABC/7) — Chef Curtis Stone

WENDY WILLIAMS (10 a.m., WNYW/5, 4 p.m., WWOR/9, midnight, BET) — David Meister

THE TALK (2 p.m., CBS/2) — Jamie Lee Curtis

MEREDITH VIEIRA (2 p.m., WNBC/4) — Matt LeBlanc

DR. PHIL (3 p.m., WCBS/2) — Wild teen behavior caught on video

STEVE HARVEY (3 p.m., NBC/4) — Casey Wilson

ELLEN DEGENERES (4 p.m., WNBC/4) — Kaley Cuoco-Sweeting

NIGHT

DAILY SHOW (11 p.m., Comedy Central) — Jimmy Carter

CONAN (11 p.m., TBS) — Fred Armisen

LETTERMAN (11:35 p.m., CBS/2) — Gordon Ramsay

FALLON (11:35 p.m., NBC/4) — Charlie Day

MEYERS (12:35 a.m., NBC/4) — Casey Wilson

LATE LATE SHOW (12:35 a.m., CBS/2) — Ozzy Osbourne



Fred Armisen visits Conan.