Growing up, Juan Oliveras had plenty of teasing about his name. The Northport resident says, "Too often I would hear . . . 'hey, there's Juan 2, 3' or 'here comes Juan in a Million' and sometimes 'it's the Juan and only.' So when I became an obsessed runner I thought this plate would be apropos.

If you have a creative license, send us a note about what inspired it, along with a photo of the plate, and maybe we'll use it in an upcoming LI Life. Email your name, phone number, hometown and photo to iris.quigley@newsday.com or mail them to Iris Quigley, Library, Newsday, 235 Pinelawn Rd., Melville, NY 11747-4250.

WHO'S COOKING:
Joanne Lisi with her veal spiedini dish.

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The unlikely life coach

A tough guy shares his life lessons to motivate teenagers

BY ERIN GEISMAR
Special to Newsday

Jeff Yalden is a self-described "fat, 40-year-old bald dude," and the motivational speaker has no qualms about shouting that as loud as possible from high school stages around the country.

He runs around in ripped jeans and Harley-Davidson T-shirts. He's got piercings in both ears, tattoos covering each arm and a long, scraggly goatee.

"You're looking at me, and you're saying, 'You're the guy my parents tell me not to talk to,' " he told students at Shoreham-Wading River High School in April. "I understand."

The students laugh when he makes jokes. They're quiet when he's serious. They're amazed when he recalls stories about chopping down his daughter's bedroom door with a chain saw to prove a point.

Most importantly, they seem to understand what he wants them to understand: No matter how difficult life gets, its rewards are within reach.

After speaking at a Michigan high school in 2004, Yalden, who is actually 42 and grew up in Port Jefferson, received an unsigned email from a student there. She was moved by Yalden's speech, especially one major point: "Suicide is a permanent solution to a tempo-
Students say Yalden really connects with them; here it’s with Kenny Rottkamp in Shoreham. Yalden says he passes on to kids the tools he learned in the Marine Corps, like learning to focus on goals, control your attitude and recognize your strengths.

**WORDS TO LIVE BY**

The advice Yalden dispenses comes from personal, and painful, experience, which he doesn’t mind sharing with others.

- **Take time to think.**
  Yalden talks about rash reactions he’s had to situations in his life and says he regrets not thinking things through. Taking time each day to reflect and analyze is a worthwhile habit to form, he says.

- **Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.**
  Yalden was hospitalized for suicidal behavior at the age of 17 and again at 22. While he was serving in the military, one of his subordinates committed suicide in front of him.

- **Is your life meaningful, fulfilling and rewarding?**
  Yalden says if you can’t answer these questions, you don’t have enough goals.

- **Lose the expectations, focus on the objectives.**

Yalden, chatting with Haylie Kinsler in Shoreham, has worked with teens for 20 years and says he’s been honored to do it.

**Lessons from the Marines**

After his first daughter was born, Yalden joined the Marines. He liked the discipline and the routine, and he learned many of the tools he now teaches: how to focus on goals, control your attitude and recognize your strengths.

Yalden found his passion for working with teens when he was stationed in Florida and was asked to speak to a local school’s ROTC group. When Yalden was honorably discharged after four years in the service — the circumstances of which is another story he shares with students — he moved back to New Hampshire and got a job as a permanent substitute teacher and a coach. He once again found himself in a position to help young students overcome their obstacles and believe in themselves, and Yalden transitioned that skill into a career one speaking engagement at a time.

Alyssa Carrera, 25, auditioned for MTV’s “Made” when she was a high school senior in Minnesota. On the show Carrera set her sights on being a stand-up comic, and Yalden helped her earn a scholarship to a comedy school in Chicago.

Carrera didn’t stick with comedy, but she said Yalden was the best part of the MTV experience and that they still keep in touch. Yalden said he feels honored to do what he does, and lucky, because he’s just as inspired by the people he’s met as they are by him.

“I’ve met kids who have been through a lot worse than I’ve been,” he said. “But it’s my responsibility to take the wisdom and experience I have and give that to them. That’s why I’m effective — I’m edgy, I’m real and I make sense to them.”

rights to his daughters so her new husband could adopt them. Yalden said it was one of the hardest decisions he’s ever made.

Tim Hodsdon, of New Hampshire, a friend of Yalden’s since that time, said it was a dark period in Yalden’s life that affected him deeply.

He said looking at Yalden now — he’s happily remarried, has rekindled a relationship with his daughters and has a successful career — he’s moved by the change.

“Back then, when things were bad, Jeff would go down so hard and so fast,” he said. “To see him speak now, I can’t believe it’s the same guy.”

The writer had been considering taking her life. School officials tracked down the student — Erin Dush, who was 15 at the time. She willingly went into counseling and now counts Yalden as a friend.

“He was the only one I had told anything like that to,” said Dush, now 24. “He has the unique talent of being able to connect with a lot of people.”

**Talking at teen level**

Yalden has been working with teenagers for 20 years as a motivational speaker and a life coach. He said he has about 150 engagements a year. In 2005 he was a life coach on an episode of MTV’s “Made,” which aims to motivate teens to achieve an extreme goal by giving them help from an adult who’s literally been there and done that.

Shari Santoriello, president of the Shoreham-Wading River Parent Teacher Student Association, said she chose Yalden to speak there because he had rave reviews.

“He’s whole look is just appealing,” she said. “And his approach — he’s not talking down to them, he’s talking at their level.”

Standing outside the auditorium after Yalden’s presentation, senior Kristen Suarez, 17, of Wading River, had tears in her eyes.

“I think he was the best speaker we’ve ever had,” she said. “Everyone was really listening. He’s been through things, and his stories are really real.”

Yalden lives in Cape Cod now. But when he was growing up on Long Island, he said, he played sports with the kids on his street, everyone in town knew his family and he “didn’t have to try to fit in.”

Life changed when his family moved to New Hampshire during his junior year of high school.

“All of a sudden I had to find out who I was in this new environment,” he said. “I went through a major depression.”

He said he felt like an outcast, did poorly in school and that family problems he was oblivious to as a child became obvious. He was hospitalized when he was 17 after his father found him in the middle of the night with a gun. By the time he was 23, Yalden had fathered two children, gotten married and divorced.

A few years later, Yalden said, his ex-wife remarried and asked him to give up parental