

GREAT ESCAPES

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SHEBOYGAN – Anthony Martin could break into your house in a minute flat. Jail Cells? Don't even try it. Deadbolts, straightjackets and shackles have nothing on Martin, who's escaped from cells in Kewaunee, Marinette, Clark and Racine counties, as well as Waushara County, where he escaped in four minutes, 45 seconds – after being chained hand and foot, behind six prison doors.

IT'S A GOOD THING MARTIN IS AN HONEST GUY. “Needless to say, my neighbors trust me,” said the Sheboygan escape artist, a compact man who has landed on the pages of Ripley’s Believe It Or Not! A record four times for his death-defying feats.

He also starred in the ABC special “Secrets of the Worlds Greatest Escape Artist,” during which he terrified host James Brolin when it took him more than two minutes to free himself from handcuffs and chains and escape from a locked box that was quickly filling with 2,000 pounds of fine-grain sand.

Earlier in the program, Martin has escaped from cuffs while trapped in a locked box submerged beneath the frozen waters of a Wisconsin lake, where a 30-second mistake could have left him as frozen as a Popsicle.

He also freed himself from a locked freight packing container that was tossed out of a cargo plane two and a half miles above ground, a feat that Martin handily survived.

“I just wanted to do the greatest escape ever done.” Martin said during a recent interview at his Sheboygan home. “I tried to find out what could be the most awesome, as extreme as I could think of.”

So what’s this fascination with locks and boxes? For Martin, it began when he received a magic kit as a boy, mastered the simple tricks and soon graduated from sleight of hand to the skilled art of escape. “When I would do a magic act, it just seemed like I was a big fake,” he said. “But I liked the idea of really doing it, I was a cocky kid. I always knew I could escape” Although his parents were supportive, they likely wished their son had taken up a safer hobby, snake charming perhaps?

Actually, Martin did work with a snake once, during an escape in Milwaukee when he opened for comedian Henny Youngman. It was all in an effort to bring more excitement to his shows. “We live in an extreme world. It has to be life or death or nobody wants to watch it,” he said. But that’s okay with

Martin, who thrills for the bizarre and an opportunity to shock his viewers.

“There’s a beauty in danger when it’s deliberately sought out,” “To me, the quality of the act is like a tightrope walker or a trapeze performer without a net. We all understand what he’s doing and know we couldn’t. It’s the dangerous environment that creates the drama.”

But danger is as far as Martin’s theatrics will go.

You won’t find him slithering through any trap doors or freeing himself from break-away cuffs. He’s the real deal, no trickery or deception. He uses a pick to free himself from cuffs, to open locks and release chains.

“Most handcuffs are pretty rudimentary in design,” Martin said. “A padlock is more difficult to open.” But not impossible and that is the key (so to speak) to Martin’s success.

The bonded locksmith has fine-tuned his work to include locks from virtually any era. His vast collection covers several walls of his basement studio, creating a metallic memoir of his career.

In addition to “Secrets” Martin’s appeared on “The Late Show,” “Good Morning America” and “How’d They Do That?” among others, and has been covered in newspapers and telecasts worldwide.

As far as secrets are concerned, he shares them readily during these interviews.

“Old time escape artists would be behind things,” said Martin, who seems almost offended by the chicanery of sleight of hand. “When I escape, I pick the handcuffs in front of you.”

(But not so clearly that he’d give away all his secrets. After all, there are some people who just shouldn’t know how to pick locks.)

Sometimes, it takes Martin a while to master new locks, but he always frees himself, even when he’s been tossed out of an airplane wearing a padlock and chains that send him hurtling to earth two times faster than the average sky diver. “I’ve had close calls. “I spent three minutes in a barrel underwater one time, which is a long time,” he said. “A very long time.”

“But I’ve always escaped,” he added, “You need to be confident enough in what you’re doing to follow through. You really can’t panic.” That, Martin said, would mean almost certain death.

“Fear is only a good thing if you use it to educate yourself,” Martin said. “The more you know about your subject, the less you fear it.

“Knowledge is power,” he added, “and I think that applies to this business.”

This fall, Martin will appear on an episode of the Learning Channel’s “How’d You Do That?” In addition, he plans to begin offering corporate, school and church performances in order to make his work known to more people. He’s also hoping casinos take him up on his offer to bring his crystal crypt sand escape to their venues for a show.