

## **Full Transcript of Mark's interview on I Am Refocused Radio**

**[00:00:04.940] - Shemaiah**

You are listening to "I am Refocused Radio" with your host, Shemaiah Reed. This show is designed to inspire you to live your purpose and regain your focus. And now here's your host, Shemaiah Reed.

**[00:00:20.990] - Shemaiah**

Hey, welcome to I am Focused Radio. We are here once again. And today we have another amazing show on it for you all. We have our special guest. His name is Mark Steven Porro. He is a native New Jersey guy. But we got to learn everything about his amazing story. He has a powerful story and man who doesn't love them all. I know I love my mom and man, this guy right here, he really loves his mom and he has an amazing website you should check out is a cup of tea on the morgue. And today we're going to be talking about his amazing book. But before we even do that, let's welcome back to the show. Say, first of all, how are you doing today?

**[00:01:02.630] - Mark**

Very well, thank you.

**[00:01:19.340] - Shemaiah**

I appreciate you making the time for us and a little bit about you, if you will, uh, share a little bit about yourself with our audience because you didn't just write an amazing book, but you also have an amazing career as well.

**[00:01:35.510] - Mark**

Well, um, I'm not so sure about amazing. Thank you for that. I grew up in New Jersey. There were six of us, I'm the fifth. Three boys, three girls. I'm the youngest son. And my parents were great. They're originally New Yorkers, and they moved to New Jersey. My dad was a chemist. He worked for a couple of firms in New Jersey. My mother was a full-time proofreader for The Bergen Record, which at the time was the largest newspaper in New Jersey. We had a great upbringing in Ridgewood, which is considered a suburb of New York City. It's about 20 miles outside New York City. And depending on traffic you get, you can get there anywhere between a half hour to 20 hours. But it was a great place because the Village of Ridgewood was very nice, good education system and really a cool place to grow up. And then a short distance away, you had the center of culture. It was just fantastic. So I got exposed to a lot of really cool things, especially the arts, which were and still are a big part of my life. And that attributed to my mother and her love of the arts. And that was pretty cool. So that's it in a nutshell. I went to The Ohio State University and studied industrial design. And then I caught the acting bug, I think from reliving some of my childhood exposure to the arts. And I went out to Hollywood for 28 years and did the Hollywood thing. I

had pretty good success for a while. And then as time goes on, you age out unless you've got a really good career going.

**[00:03:23.900] - Mark**

At the time, I had an okay career, but things started slowing down. But while I was there, it was very inspirational. I think my parents kind of put this in us, too, because we all worked as kids and we all owned our own companies as we got older. And so one of my adventures was I started a snack food company with my brother to honor my dad and his half-popped popcorn snack he invented in the early 60s. And it was kind of like a family secret. He passed before we were actually in the stores. He created this product, which we called "Grandpa Po's Originals," and it became a national brand for a while. It was the Snack of the Day on Rachael Ray. It was a really good fun, but a lot of work. I built a beautiful factory in LA. It was an organic snack. We were riding that new wave and then in 2011, I got a call from my brother who said my mother just shut down.

**[00:04:30.620] - Mark**

She was living in the house we all grew up in and she seemed to be somewhat depressed and wanted to check out. So, we kids all flew in and we were pretty much on death watch. Her doctor cut off all meds and food and hospice was called. And when hospice is called, the end is not such a happy one. So, that was a big deal. That's how the book opens with that call. And so I changed my life. At that time, I was 55 and a carefree bachelor living in LA, having a good time, no steady girlfriend, no children, never married. My only obligation really was to my business. And, so this call kind of changed everything. I flew back home and stayed with her for several weeks, and then she snapped out of it, which was great, but I realized that she really wanted and needed, I think, love to be in that house again. We had a live-in family that was overseeing the household duties, cooking, and cleaning for my mom.

**[00:05:40.610] - Mark**

She could still walk and do things, but after this episode she was bedridden and that was pretty much it. But once she snapped out of it, I started thinking, okay, I need to do something because my mother deserves better. And that's what the book's about.

**[00:05:58.140] - Shemaiah**

We're talking to our guest named Mark Stevens in his book, "A Cup of Tea on the Commode." Talk about the call, because when you started to rush back to New Jersey and find yourself by your mom's bedside caring for your mother. What was going through your mind? Were you just saying? Boom. Gotta get up and go. How were you reacting to that call?

**[00:06:28.690] - Mark**

Oh, yeah definitely. I grew up in a very nurturing family, and family was number one. 14 years earlier, I got a call, similar call about my dad, and my brother, the same brother had to make those calls which are not easy. He said, dad has 30 days, and I flew in the next day. It's just what I do anyway. And with my mom we didn't know how long it was going to be. And so there's no question you get on a plane and go. And then once I got there, she was in a I called it a semi-comatose state. She didn't open her eyes. She did open them on occasion and looked at the corner of the room, which was very interesting. And I have a chapter about that. But she didn't talk, and she didn't really, uh, acknowledge any of us other than she was very responsive to touch, which was nice.

**[00:07:23.290] - Mark**

And so one of us slept in the bed with her to be close, just in case she needed something. My younger sister and I hung out with the hospice nurses. Hospice was there all the time. They were great. And we wanted to care for our mother as much as possible. So we learned, we were really good students. We learned whatever we could to, learn how to change the diapers on an adult. Everything's a little bit different. Changing the bed while a helpless patient is lying in it. Certain techniques of washing and and how to care for a fragile older person at this time. My mother just turned 89. So it was it was good to learn that. And I think my mom sensed that we were there. And then when she snapped out of it, whenever hospice wasn't there, my sister and I took over.

**[00:08:20.050] - Mark**

And then when my younger sister went back to Michigan, to her family, I stayed on for a number of more weeks and took over. And it was great though also a little awkward. I think because it's very rare for a son to take on the caregiving duties. And at that point, I wasn't 24/7 but by the end of the year, I kind of did fill that spot. But it was a little bit of an adjustment because you're seeing your mother for the first time, at least for me, naked, and you're seeing what all those years have done to her body. And this is where I think some of my design and acting experience came in because I assumed the role of the caregiver and got over the personal relationship as best I could and said, I've got a job to do. So I'm going to assume this role and do it as best as possible.

**[00:09:11.950] - Mark**

But, you know, she's still my mother. I asked permission for various things. And when I did ask her if she wanted me to move back and take over everything, she said yes. And I said, well, if I do that, two things. First of all, we will have fun. Second of all, that means I'm in charge. And her mood completely changed. And then she puckered up for a kiss. She was a I called her a little bit of a kissing bandit, and I wasn't sure if that puckering up was a sign of surrender or one wishing me luck. So I gave her a kiss and hoped for the best because she could be a tough cookie.

**[00:09:54.130] - Shemaiah**

And with the knowledge of understanding that you became, uh, your mother's primary caregiver. And you just mentioned getting her blessing to be the one to step up for the challenge and be with her. What was it like to have that balance between being the one in charge to oversee her care, but also maintaining respect for the dignity of your mom?

**[00:10:27.920] - Mark**

Um, I don't know. I think for me it was pretty easy because she is at that point pretty much a child and completely dependent on whoever was in the room caring for her. And she seemed to be quite content with whoever because unlike my dad, my dad wanted to maintain his dignity until the end. He rarely asked for help. We knew when he needed it and we would jump in. But with my mom, she was like, you know, she was almost like the queen. Go ahead and take care of it. You're now my servant. So, that was a little interesting. And sometimes she took it a little too far. But usually she had a good sense of humor. My dad did as well, and I luckily inherited some of those genes. So, humor played a major role in our journey. But I think with that role, even if it's not your mother, maintaining respect for that person and, if not maintaining their dignity, restoring their dignity.

**[00:11:32.750] - Mark**

Because at that point, I think my mother lost some of her dignity. So I did some things to boost her spirits. One of the first things I did was I bought her a new wardrobe because these old day dresses and they were tattered, and they look like old person's clothes. And I didn't want my mom looking like that. I wanted her to look her best and feel her best. That was an awkward thing for a middle-aged man going out looking for a senior citizen's clothing and stuff. But it was still kind of fun. I also created a thing I called Day of Beauty. My mother worked full-time, she had six kids, but she treated herself once a week to the beauty parlor where she got a shampoo and set and had her nails done. She had gorgeous nails. She was a nail model in her late teens-early 20s. She had gorgeous nails.

**[00:12:27.110] - Mark**

So she always took care of those nails, which were a miracle raising six kids. So I wanted to recreate that for her at home because, I don't know, the last time she went to the beauty parlor or was ever really cared for, or treated like a beautiful woman. And so while she sat on the commode, I soaked her feet in Epsom salts. I washed her, shampooed and rinsed her hair. She got a full body massage with lotion. Then I tended to any medical needs, and then she picked out her wardrobe. I blew dried her hair and ponytailed it, or sometimes even gave it a braid. Then I did her nails and then finished it off with some nice bright, bright red lipstick to match her nails. I didn't think that much of it. I just thought this is something that she'd like.

**[00:13:19.970] - Mark**

On the first Day of Beauty as I wheeled her to the kitchen for breakfast, we had a large a mirror in the dining room, I parked her in front, leaned in cheek to cheek and I asked, "Who's that pretty girl?" And she beamed. And it was just gorgeous. The effect on her and certainly on me as well, was just profound. So I kept doing this with her because I think just kind of radiated. Whoever saw her after that said, "Oh my gosh, you look great." And and so the wardrobe and Day of Beauty had a huge impact.

**[00:14:11.300] - Mark**

Our journey I say lasted three and a half years. And so I kept this up because of the, just the beautiful effect it had on her and those asround her.

**[00:14:25.380] - Shemaiah**

When you look back. What lessons do you believe you learned about the importance of the small gestures that you created with acts of kindness, and providing her the best care possible, while you had the time left with her?

**[00:14:43.270] - Mark**

Well, I have to say, because at that point, not having children and not being married, unconditional love was something I was probably still grappling with. So I definitely learned unconditional love because it was my my M.O. at that time was I would do things, jump in with full gusto and then get bored or accomplish what I wanted to accomplish, and then move on to the next thing. Well, with my mother, I was not moving on until she wanted to move on. So I had to learn no matter what the the the mental, physical or emotional stress you're going through, it's the job I took on. And so I not only had to make sure Mom trusted me, but I had five siblings that allowed me to take this on. So I didn't want to disappoint anybody. So, definitely unconditional love was something I learned.

**[00:15:38.260] - Mark**

And patience. Being a parent, there are times where, you know, you just love him to death. And there're other times where you you you want you want to kill them because they can be stubborn and just a real pain in the neck. And my mother was very independent and she was a guilt tripper and but also funny. So I had to deal with all that stuff. And there were times where, you know, it wasn't perfect. I blew my top occasionally but you get over it. And luckily, she was very forgiving. But I'd say probably the main thing for me was empathy. I think for anybody in that position, empathy is a big deal because you really have to put yourself in their shoes. They are still a person. They still deserve respect and dignity. They have a lot of wisdom and they deserve love.

**[00:16:33.400] - Mark**

Another thing I learned is that wanting to feel pretty doesn't end at 90 years old. If you really tune in to what you think they need and then also you can ask "Would you like to have your hair washed today?"

Would you like some makeup? It was just a very cool time that we had together. And a lot of that came out of how I was raised. So it didn't seem to be that big of a deal. I mean, it ended up being a lovely experience, certainly for me. And then when I shared my story early on with other friends who were going through this because especially as baby boomers, we're all dealing with this, and it's a phenomenon that's just going to get worse and worse or better and better, depending on how you look at it because we're all living longer and this is going to become a crisis if we don't handle it the right way.

**[00:17:34.150] - Mark**

I'm hoping to inspire other people to handle it the way I did. Because it was rewarding for me. Certainly rewarding for my mom and for my siblings. And then as I shared my story, people really got some inspiration and some tips because it's I don't say it's a how to book because it is a memoir with some lovely stories, but it's a what I did book. And there were some, I think, some really good tips in there that people have certainly benefited from. And you know when I see my mom and the look on her face, even in those very frustrating days when you see her smile or pucker up for a kiss or give me a witty comeback to something I said, it was all the payback or joy you needed to know that you're doing the right thing. And so it was great. I think it might have been more rewarding for me than it was for my mom.

**[00:18:29.880] - Shemaiah**

We're talking to Mark Steven Porro about his mom in the book that he wrote in honor of her, "ACupofTeaontheCommode.org" is the website you can go to when you see through the lens of your mother. The role was reversed. At one point in time, she took care of you and then another set of time you start to take care of her. Was something that you appreciate the most during the process of learning of. The power of just being there with your mom, knowing that she knows that you haven't forgotten her.

**[00:19:19.180] - Mark**

Well, there was I guess one incident that kind of brings that into focus. There was one day we really had a tough time. She had a tough time, and I got very frustrated with her. And she looked at me and she. She said, "Why are you so good to me?" And I said, because you're my mother and you deserve to be loved. And it's an honor for a son to take care of his mother. And she was shocked. And she said, "It is?" And I had to convince her that this was very important because you know, how long did you take care of us? I mean, it's 18 years, sometimes a lot longer. But for all of us, we all left. You know, to go to college at 18. So that was it. But my gosh, it did take some convincing because she actually felt guilty. And it hurt me that she felt guilty.

**[00:20:15.780] - Mark**

So after I convinced her and certainly by my actions, convinced her it was, let's say, the realization of the complete role reversal. And, you know, you accept your parents, I guess, whether you like it or not, they're your parents and you accept that they are in charge. You know, they should be for a certain period

of time. And, uh, and she kind of let me take over at that point. And so that was a that was a very important moment.

**[00:20:48.210] - Shemaiah**

People listen to this right now, and maybe they find themselves or someone that they know unexpectedly thrust into the role of becoming a caregiver for their aging parent. Based on your experience, what words of wisdom would you give to that person in order for them to see the bigger picture in the responsibility of taking care of their aging parent?

**[00:21:16.490] - Mark**

Well, I think the first thing in most important is, is to be there in any role that you can. If you're present, that's lovely. If you're present and actually doing some of the work, though not everybody is cut out for that. Even in my own family, there were a siblings that just were hands off. They did other things to to help out with the house. One sister did a lot of cooking, and made or bought gifts. My mother loved little stuffed toys, anything with an animal was was great. Mom was a big animal lover. So take whatever role you're comfortable with, because if you're uncomfortable, they will sense that, you know? And then I was fortunate to have hospice there for a number of months, and I learned from the pros as best I could.

**[00:22:13.070] - Mark**

So there are certain things, if you're going to take on more, learn how to do it correctly. Because if you go in and you're not ready or trained, it'll be frustrating for both of you and also could be dangerous for your loved ones. So, I would say that that is probably the most important thing, but if you're just there, I mean, some of the the best moments that we had was just sitting at the kitchen table holding hands, um, not saying a word. She had the gift of gab most of her life, but not those last few years. She didn't say a lot, but she, like I said earlier, responded to touch. And those were beautiful moments because you knew there was a lot of love going on between those hands. So I would say I hope that answers your question. But, you know, being there, I think is the most important and then take as much responsibility on as you feel comfortable doing and certainly qualified to be doing so.

**[00:23:13.260] - Shemaiah**

Last question for you. He mentioned a hospice with their experience. What would you say is a good balance to allow them to do their part, but know when is the right time to step up, step in and kind of intervene, if you will, to make sure that the quality of the care is being executed.

**[00:23:36.820] - Mark**

Well, we were lucky. I think all of the hospice nurses were were quite good. And all they do are they do do their own thing. We had a number of them who broke the rules because at that point, Mom was off meds, off food. They said give ice chips if she needs a little moisture on her lips, but that's it. We had one

hospice nurse who ignored the directive. We didn't do this, but my younger sister and I were there all the time when hospice was there, and we never stepped in to do anything that they were supposed to do. We observed and learned what we could and we asked they were they seem to be happy that we were interested and wanted to learn. So not one of them said anything like, you know, get out of my way. I've got work to do. They were all very helpful.

**[00:24:31.450] - Mark**

But this one nurse looked at the directive that said no food, no drinks and no getting out of bed and stuff like that. And she went right into my mother and asked her if she was hungry. Now, my mother's eyes were closed for several weeks, but her eyes shot open like the dinner bell rang. And then this nurse accused us of trying to starve our mother to death, which I think in some cases may happen, you know, with the kids. But we loved our mother. We certainly weren't. We were listening to the hospice rules. So hospice doesn't always get it right. Um, so at that point, I felt really guilty. After we had to get that nurse out of the house because her supervisor even said you broke the rules, you need to leave. So before they sent another nurse, I went and asked my mom if she was in fact hungry, and she said, well, what do you got?

**[00:25:28.510] - Mark**

And this is again, her first words in weeks. And I said, anything you want. At this point it was March. So it had been about maybe 3 or 4 weeks since she had any food. And she said, how about some pumpkin pie? And I said, well, okay, it's March. It's not really pumpkin pie season, but my brother, who lived locally, was in the living room and I asked him to go out and take a look. So he took on the challenge and he came back with two pumpkin pies. And those pumpkin pies were like miracle workers. She she woke right up. She downed half the pie the first day down the half a pie the second day, and then the full pie the next day. But. And she snapped out of it. She was back and she recognized all of us. And I think we were off to the races because she's like, okay, my kids are here.

**[00:26:20.620] - Mark**

Life is good again. I'm going to I'm going to be here for a while, which was great. So, not everybody follows the rules. And in this case, this particular nurse actually did us a favor.

**[00:26:34.890] - Shemaiah**

Once again. Listen. Refocus radio talking to our guest, Mark Steven Porro. You can get his book "A Cup of Tea on the Commode." You can go to his website. [Acupofteaonthecommode.org](http://Acupofteaonthecommode.org). First and foremost, I want to say thank you for what you did for your mom. I think that's commendable. I think that's powerful. It says a lot about your heart. And hopefully someone listening will be inspired to do the same for their parents. Once again, want to say thank you, Mark, for your time.



**[00:27:06.050] - Mark**

I appreciate it. Shemaiah, thank you very much. It was a great. Every time I get to share my mom's story, I keep her in the present, which is a beautiful gift for me, so I very much appreciate it.