Danny Kourianos played it safe.

He had been out of college five years. He and his wife, Stephanie, worked for eBay. They were doing well financially, building a life in the suburbs of Salt Lake City and living the dream. But, it was someone else’s dream, not Danny’s.

Something made him stop and realize that he was at a crossroad: he could carry on playing it safe or he could try to strike it big and risk everything. He was getting to the tipping point where he might have too much to lose, so it was time to venture out and risk it all.

Together Kourianos and Steph found the courage to sell everything they had, quit their jobs, cash in their eBay stock and move to New York City. Sound crazy? It was. But, before you wonder why, you have to know something about Kourianos: he’s hilarious.

Being around Kourianos is like being in a sitcom; he is bigger than life. He probably came out of the womb cracking jokes, but it took him 30 years to find the courage to pursue his dreams and feel confident enough to be funny on stage.

For Kourianos, living in New York City was like being in a crazy dream. “Every day I walked out of my apartment door thinking, ‘This is awesome, this is terrible, I can’t believe I’m here!’ New York offered him everything he hoped for.

The dream was remarkable and, at times, a bit of a nightmare.

“There was the most amazing architecture in the world… with a homeless man peeing in front of it. I’d walk down the street and look at the incredible sights, then I’d see two people on the sidewalk lighting each other on fire.”

The goal was to get gigs doing comedy while trying to make enough money to live in the big city. Steph made it possible. She had just finished her teaching degree and found a job teaching English in the Bronx. Kourianos got into an improv group and was working his way into some club gigs. He needed a day job to help get by, so he ended up at an online ad agency during the day. “I made like nothing,” and in a city as expensive as New York, it really was nothing, he remembers.

Even so, New York was an amazing, fabulous, grueling and refining experience. Kourianos is sure that the highs outweighed the lows.

“The reality actually lives up to the fantasy,” he said. “There are so few things that can deliver on that promise, but New York can.”

He had dreamt of living in the heart of American culture his entire life. As a kid he had stayed up late every weekend to watch Saturday Night Live. During his teenage years, his life was centered on music, and New York City was still the center of it all. He read the Village Voice, an independent New York newspaper, and dreamed about being at the concerts that were playing in the Big Apple.

Kourianos’s outgoing personality makes it hard to think of him any other way. But, he spent a lot of time in his younger years unsure he had the courage to be himself. “When I think back to when I was 18, I think that kid was an idiot!”

When Kourianos graduated high school, he didn’t really have a plan. He was a good student, but mostly good at blending in with his friends. He didn’t have direction or purpose in his education. His goals were to fit in and to have fun.
He loved going for walks around his neighborhood with his mom in the evenings. As they walked, they would talk about life.

“I didn’t know what to do,” he said. “I was so confused. I thought I might sign up for the Air Force or just work.”

One night they saw Kim Pullan, Kourianos’s high school debate coach, out walking as well. Pullan asked Kourianos about his plans and told him, “You’re going to the college tomorrow to meet with my husband, Scott. He has a place open on the debate team. He will give you a scholarship, and you’re going to college.”

In high school Kourianos participated in debate for fun, but he wouldn’t have called himself a debater. The next day he went to CEU and nervously snuck into the back of the debate room. Scott Pullan was coaching another student, Tristy Atwood, as she performed a dramatic monologue. Kourianos was shocked, “And I was like, ‘wait what is this? This was not what we did in high school! I can do this acting thing?’ When I saw Tristy acting, I realized that I could do that.”

Comedic monologues, dramatic pieces and reader’s theater dominated Kourianos’s time on the nationally ranked debate squad. He would never have been a “theater kid” in high school because he was afraid of getting ridiculed, though secretly he would have loved to do that.

CEU created a huge moment for him. “It really changed everything about me,” he said. Acting created a new thrill in his young life. He loved the rush of performing. It gave him the guts to do stand-up comedy.

Kim and Scott Pullan and CEU changed his life. The natural jokester gets seriously teary when he talks about it.

For Kourianos, CEU wasn’t about the degree. It was about finding freedom to learn to express himself without fear. “I could try anything I wanted and spread my wings in a way I couldn’t under the social pressure of high school or the pressure of big state academics and expenses.”

During his second year at CEU, Kourianos soared. He tried many activities that he hadn’t before. He wrote for the entertainment section of The Eagle newspaper and won a position as the activities vice-president in student government.

“CEU was an incubator to test things out — like the research and development for my life,” he said. “It didn’t take a lot of investment and the rewards of trying everything out were so valuable. I wasn’t afraid of failure and was protected in a way that I could fly!”

After graduating, Kourianos finished a bachelor’s in communications at the University of Utah. His time at the U of U was all about getting finished and preparing for life. But… “When I look back at my college days, I think about CEU,” he said. “That is what I talk to my friends about.”

When he graduated from U of U, Kourianos had his future planned: he would get a job at the Salt Lake Tribune as an entertainment writer, then work his way up in the entertainment writing world until he wrote for Rolling Stone magazine.

The Tribune rejected Kourianos without batting an eye, and he was crushed. All of the sudden, he realized that his degree in communications was a little nebulous. Though he had a broad knowledge, he didn’t have in-depth skills that he could market in the real world.

It was another one of those defining moments, but Kourianos had the maturity to relax a little and pursue other options. He decided not to get hung up because things didn’t go according to plan.

“Now I’m so glad that I didn’t get a job at Tribune,” he said. “Chance took over and I’m so much happier. I can’t imagine being anywhere else.”

The lesson Kourianos learned from the Tribune came in handy years later when he was in New York trying to live his ultimate dream as a stand-up comedian. After two and a half years of doing everything he could to make it big in the comedy world, he realized that he was about 10 years too old. His peers were all in their 20s living on their parent’s dime. They were east coast rich kids who could afford to invest 10 years to develop a career, get an agent and make a name for themselves.
He and Steph felt like they had to decide if they wanted to continue to chase his dream, or if another dream was becoming more valuable. It was time to start a family, and New York City wasn’t where they wanted to raise kids. Steph’s parents are British. She grew up half a world away from her extended family and wanted her kids to have quality and quantity time with their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Together, Kourianos and Steph decided it was time to move forward in their lives. Salt Lake City was where they wanted to live to be close to family again.

Giving up his life-long dream was gut-wrenching, but Kourianos is proud of the fact that he risked it all to live a dream. Now when he tucks his two boys into bed, there may be a few stories about New York City sprinkled into the regular regimen of fairy tales. He is encouraging them to live their dreams.

“The only thing I would change was to do the N.Y. experience when I was 19 or right after college,” he said. “I had a lot of fear that held me back, which was stupid. I didn’t go before I was married because I wanted someone there with me.”

Kourianos doesn’t want to go back to where he was, but finding the courage to take risks is one of the reasons he is successful as an executive in a multi-national company today.

Kourianos’s boss at a little on-line ad agency in New York City moved on to working for Yahoo! When Kourianos was ready to leave New York, things fell into place. He worked remotely in Salt Lake for Yahoo! Though Kourianos loved his work, he became frustrated with the company’s vision. Yahoo! went through three CEOs while he worked for them.

“To be honest, the company was sort of a mess,” he said. “It was trying to find its identity. I was thinking it was time to go somewhere else. Most of the tech jobs are concentrated on the coasts. We were thinking that we would have to move to California or New York because there wasn’t much in Salt Lake at the time.”

Steph found an ad on Craig’s List for a start-up company called Media Forge. Kourianos was skeptical, but he decided to check it out. Media Forge was thrilled to find someone with his qualifications in Salt Lake City. They planned to meet and Kourianos found a little, scrappy company with good contracts creating internet advertising for some great clients. He had an enthralling conversation with one the company’s founders and realized that they were really speaking the same language.

So, this time he had the courage to make a big leap without fear. The job opening at Media Forge wasn’t exactly what Kourianos wanted to be doing, plus the pay was low, but he was willing to take a risk.

“I really saw the potential of the company and liked where it was headed,” he said. “I thought, ‘I want a seat on this bus, even if it isn’t the exact seat I want to be sitting in, I’ll get on the bus.’”

Without hesitation, Kourianos jumped from a world-wide company to a little startup working out of an office space in Cottonwood, Utah. Pretty soon, he moved to the seat on the bus he wanted, the head of product development. Media Forge was steadily growing and had 40 employees.

Rukaten, the largest e-commerce business in Japan, was looking to acquire a company that specialized in display advertising (banner ads for retailers). The search led them to Utah to the little company with 40 employees. Herosha Nikatami, the CEO of Rukaten, and Tony Zito, a founder of Media Forge, met and hit it off. Nikatami had a vision and really liked the founding team at Media Forge. Together they built a company based on the “startup” culture.

The entire Media Forge team stayed in place when Rukaten bought them, which is rare. Overnight, the little startup company in Cottonwood was able to capitalize on the resources of a multi-national company with offices in London, Chile and Sydney.

Today, Kourianos travels the world as vice president of product strategies, looking for other companies for Rukaten to acquire, seeking ways to increase their presence internationally and focusing on keeping Rukaten’s products on the cutting edge. Every day is different because running the product is a scenario that touches every part of the business.

Looking back, Kourianos is thrilled with where his career has taken him. Playing it unsafe has paid off in ways that he didn’t expect.

“You have to treat your life and career the same way,” he said. “You need to embrace the curves, the bumps, the scary and dangerous elements of all of it.”