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AMERICAN AIRLINES CALL CENTER

American Airlines Workers From Windsor Get A Lighthearted Farewell At Mohegan Sun

By ERIC GERSHON

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UNCASVILLE —

American Airlines came up with the plan to shut down its 500-person call center in Windsor. The juggling act at the employees' farewell party was Steve Rizzo's idea.

So was the hourlong pep talk disguised as a comedy routine, which Rizzo, a former stand-up comic and frequent flier on American, delivered himself.

"Don't ever ask, 'What could possibly happen next?'" he quipped Tuesday night in a Mohegan Sun lounge, speaking to an audience of call center employees and their guests, some on the brink of an out-of-state transfer, some a change of career, others plain old unemployment. "The universe will answer you."

Now a motivational speaker living on eastern Long Island, Rizzo, 58, said he got to know several Connecticut call center workers over more than a decade of constant travel, because he's a chatty guy who books his flights by telephone, not the Internet.

"There's something about the Connecticut desk," he said. "They hustle to try to get you on the next flight right away. That's why I was surprised when I heard they were closing the office. I took it very personally."

When Barbara Bell of Enfield, an 18-year call center veteran, told him early this summer that the center would be closing, he decided to put on a show. He couldn't save their jobs, but he figured he might give them a few laughs at an anxious moment.

"She said to me, 'Steve, can you send some of your books?' I said, 'Barbara, I'll do more than that.'"

And so it happened that a roomful of American Airlines ticket agents found themselves hooting and hollering as a California duo in crisp gray suits called "The Passing Zone" performed jokes, gags and tricks, juggling flaming torches, gleaming silver scythes and what appeared to be operating chain saws.

"This economy has been hard on all of us. That's why we're available tonight," one of the jugglers told the 150

employees and guests.

Some will move to other states, others will work at home and some will face layoffs; American has declined to give numbers. A spokesman said the airline wasn't involved in the event, but was advised it would happen. "This is something that we appreciate him doing," said Billy Sanez, the spokeman.

Pauline Robinson, a 23-year American employee from Windsor, described the event as a way "to commune with our co-workers one last time." She said she was moving to North Carolina with her 17-year-old son to work at the call center there.

Bridgette Johnson of East Hartford, a four-year American call center employee, said she'd be working from home by Oct. 1. Her pay and benefits would be the same. But without her office mates, work would be a different experience.

"It's something to do together," Johnson said, "before the end of the end."

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