

**IT'S
OKAY
TO BE
AN
IDIOT**

DUSTIN PORTILLO

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Chapter 3

The CEO's Casting Call: An Unexpected Opportunity

After leaving the the Big Show, I strongly desired to continue performing but was still determining what direction to take. Having been a performer in the most prestigious circus on the planet, entertaining millions of audiences, and achieving my lifelong dreams, it felt unimaginable to think that anything could rival the incredible experience I had.

In my last year on tour, I often pondered whether I had achieved my childhood dream too soon, as it felt like I had reached the peak of my career at Ringling so early that there were no other challenges left to strive for.

2013 was a rollercoaster of experiences, ranging from moments of great triumph to moments of deep despair. I boldly decided to relocate to California to pursue what I believed would be the next big thing: a breakthrough in Hollywood. Upon leaving the circus, I didn't have much saved, but around \$12,000 to sustain Brandon and me. I applied for my first credit card at 27 and was approved with a credit limit of \$2,500. I maxed out the card buying a Suzuki Forenza with a modest price tag of \$2,500. I secured a commercial agent, enrolled in classes at the renowned Groundlings (an improvisation school boasting several Saturday Night Live) alums, and took workshops from a former star clown of Cirque Du Soleil.

I needed a job to help sustain myself, and a few weeks later, I interviewed at a bustling Chipotle in West Hollywood. It was a surreal experience, considering just a few months prior, I was at the pinnacle of my career in the entertainment industry. I found it hard to fathom that I was now interviewing for a quick service job. This transition was a humbling experience to say the least.

During the interview, the general manager asked about my experience with knives as they needed more employees to help prepare food. Being quick-witted, I spontaneously showed my right hand with my pointer finger bent as if it were missing. With great energy, I confidently responded with a resounding "YES." He burst into laughter, and to my surprise, I landed the job. Months later, as he was relocated

to another location out-of-state, he approached me and shared that the missing finger bit was why I got the job. It had brought him immense joy and laughter, and he knew I would add a different dynamic to the team. This encounter served as a gentle nudge from the universe, reminding me of the power of humor as a tool in my life's toolbox.

The days I spent working at Chipotle could have been mundane, especially having just come from the glitz and glamor of the big top. However, I consciously decided to dig deep inside myself, make the best of the situation, and infuse humor into each moment to make the time pass quickly and have fun. I even had coworkers willingly switch shifts to work alongside me, knowing it wouldn't be the average work day. I found ways to make customers laugh during ordering and became a pro at diffusing any tensions that arose when things didn't go according to plan – like running out of a specific product or during busier times of the day when the line was out the door, and ordering took longer.

In embracing humor as a guiding principle, my mission became to make the work environment enjoyable for myself and those around me. By using humor as a tool in my new endeavor, I was able to transform what could have been an ordinary experience into something truly memorable both for me and those around me.

It didn't take long for me to realize that the Los Angeles scene presented its unique challenges. The industry proved fiercely competitive, and the unpredictable nature of success created obstacles to establishing oneself. An inner voice began to whisper that my heart wasn't fully committed to pursuing a career in Hollywood. We can never truly achieve our desires unless our heart aligns with our true desires. As my husband often says, "If it isn't a hell yes, then it's a hell no."

Listening to the powerful whispers of my emotions, I boldly decided to say goodbye to the "City of Angels."

In January of 2014, I found solace in relocating to Tallahassee, FL, to be with Brandon, pursuing his Master's in Screenwriting at Florida State University. While being in Brandon's presence brought me a sense

of contentment, I couldn't ignore questioning my purpose and path. This mindset all too often plagues the minds of many individuals, and I was no exception.

As fate would have it, a few months later, I received a surprising call from a friend who owns a production company, specializing in creating shows for theme parks, amongst many other projects. He asked if I was free to fulfill a six-week contract for a physical comedic role at Busch Gardens in Tampa, Florida. Intrigued by the opportunity and nothing else going on, I took on the six-week contract and moved from Tallahassee to Tampa. Around the same time, I discovered a University of South Florida student looking to rent out his room, which coincided perfectly with my temporary stay.

A few weeks into the gig, I received an unexpected call between shows from Cw Wolfe, Global Field Ronald Supervisor for the Ronald McDonald program. He had received my resume and was interested in having me audition for the role of the world-famous redhead. Before receiving this call, I had previously auditioned twice, once in Dallas and once in Houston, but received rejections on both occasions. However, I had heard through informal channels that the Tampa Bay franchises held the program in high regard. They were willing to invest resources where necessary, providing considerable creative freedom to the actor portraying Ronald. He mentioned the audition was in Tampa and needed to secure a plane ticket for me. With a feeling of self-doubt and two failed attempts prior, I agreed to audition but assured him there was no need purchase an airline ticket, having just moved to Tampa. I hadn't packed much for my short-term gig, only the essentials. To this day I'm not quite sure, but I also brought a blue suitcase containing my clown shoes, wardrobe, makeup, and small props; I saw this as a sign from the universe.

A few weeks later, I auditioned alongside seven other hopefuls who had flown in from around the country. The audition was held at a local inner-city school in front of 40 enthusiastic and energetic kids. As each auditionee showed up, I quickly noticed I was the only one in a complete

clown look. The others auditioning were either amateur wrestlers and balloon sculptors, and I was the only one with a background in clowning. While we waited for the audition to begin, we were cramped in the principal's office like sardines, anxiously anticipating our time in the spotlight to impress the panel of corporate and franchise judges. Amidst the anticipation, there was one auditionee who paced, repeatedly muttering to himself, "I f***ing suck, I f***ing suck." His self-doubt began to poison the rest of us, so I firmly asked him to please be quiet as his negative energy was beginning to undermine our confidence.

Shaking off the negative energy, I was the first to audition among the group of eight performers. As I took the stage, I delivered my eight-minute performance, and time seemed to fly by remarkably fast. Following my audition, three others showcased their skills before the judges took a break to prepare for the remaining four auditions. I was called to the panel's table for a ten-minute interview before I had to leave, as I had shows at Busch Gardens later that afternoon.

During a series of questions, one particularly stood out: I was asked about my perception of McDonald's and how it might affect my performance. I found this line of questioning rather peculiar. The franchise owner had a valid reason behind their inquiry. They wanted to ensure that the person representing their brand had a positive outlook and could showcase that in their performances. After all, I had lost 127 pounds and committed to a healthier lifestyle.

In hindsight, I appreciate the thoroughness of the interview process. McDonald's needed to select someone with the talent and a genuine enthusiasm for the brand. They wanted someone who could be the face of the company, devoid of any negative perceptions, and actively promote the brand within the community authentically. The following day, I received an offer for the Ronald McDonald contract in the Tampa Bay region.

A few years later I was told that one of the judges was impressed that I could hold a serious business conversation while wearing full clown attire. He had expected me to do "clown tricks" during the interview.

The contract offer was a five-year deal that would have bound me until 2019. Since my previous experience at Ringling involved signing one-year contracts, the thought of committing to such a long-term obligation made me anxious. Not having encountered a Ronald McDonald appearance before and being unsure of the potential challenges, I realized that being locked into a five-year agreement would make it challenging to break free if necessary. Despite the confusion of the owner-operators regarding my decision to decline the five-year deal, they agreed to the year-to-year contract, which pleased me immensely.

After my gig at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay came to an end, I made the transition to the Ronald McDonald program. I had the opportunity to observe and learn from the outgoing actor who had taken on the role for over 30 years in the area. Interestingly, he had been a former print model, earning a living through sports magazine appearances showcasing watercraft before becoming Ronald.

In the program's early days, it was uncommon to find professional clowns portraying Ronald, as many of the guys were models or actors. In the late 80s and early 90s, former clowns from Ringling began to take on the role after leaving the road. The Global Field Ronald Manager, Aye Jaye, would randomly show up at the shows and scout clowns he knew were leaving. During my time on the road, we often heard that being selected as Ronald McDonald was considered the pinnacle, often referred to as the "Cadillac of Clowning."



MY PUBLICITY PHOTO I USED WHEN SIGNING AUTOGRAPHS AT EVENTS.

This opportunity would allow me to become a business owner with complete contract ownership. Unlike being an employee of an advertising agency, I would have the autonomy to make decisions. While working for an advertising agency has its advantages, such as having appearances scheduled for you, it also means being at their mercy and constantly on call. They dictate your schedule, and you are expected to comply.

I was honored to embody the character with a red smile and oversized shoes for the next three and a half years. As time went on, I grew a deep affection for Ronald and admired the values he represented. During this period, Brandon completed film school and joined me in Tampa to help me modernize the program, which desperately needed updates. Together, we created a Tampa Bay Ronald website where appearances could be booked, and Ronald's schedule of events could be viewed.

We gave the Ronald program vehicle a fresh new look and saw a resurgence in popularity, with our calendar being booked six months in advance. The Tampa Bay Ronald program was the first and only program to have the vehicle graphics of “the” Ronald in the market. We worked to rejuvenate and make Ronald appeal to the younger generation, and our efforts were evident to the public. With Brandon’s background, we incorporated his talents into the show, which had previously only featured Ronald.

In late 2015, I signed a five-year deal with the program. At contract talks, I negotiated Invisalign (clear braces) for myself. My teeth were not picture quality, and I knew I needed to show my teeth when smiling. That year in negotiations, I mentioned, “If you want Ronald to have a great smile, I’ll need to get Invisalign.” I was told to put the cost and line item in my contract, and the co-op would fit the bill.

Being the Chief Happiness Officer for a multi-billion dollar organization was an incredible opportunity that I knew came with immense responsibility. I needed to perform at my best consistently. In today’s digital age, where every move is documented and shared on social media, I had to be mindful of my appearance, words, and how I posed in photographs. I understood that even the slightest misstep could damage the reputation of a 62-year-old brand and negatively impact over 200,000 employees. I recognized the importance of my role and the influence of positivity it carried. I also made it a personal commitment never to make an appearance that was anything less than exemplary. I paid close attention to every detail, ensuring that my shoes were polished, my red wig was flawless, my makeup was symmetrical, and my costume was free of any stains or rips.

Along with a laundry list of “expectations,” I was also responsible for bringing joy to adults who had cherished childhood memories of encountering Ronald McDonald, whether through television or advertisements. I always strived to surpass everyone’s expectations during their interaction with me. I made it a point to personally greet and engage with every attendee at an event. I took my role incredibly seriously and honored the rich history of McDonald’s and its people. Even the most

minor details mattered, such as mastering Ronald's official signature, which consists of eight distinct swirls in his hair. I had to execute every action with finesse and a deliberate intention to preserve the character's integrity.



**HANGING OUT WITH A NEW FRIEND DURING A McDONALD'S CREW EVENT AT
BUSCH GARDENS TAMPA BAY IN 2015.**

In a calendar year, I made around 230+ appearances per contract, each falling into several categories. These included Ronald McDonald House Charities, grand openings, school shows, parades, hospitals, and other miscellaneous events. Among all these, the visits to children's hospitals were the most emotionally challenging for me. Every time I stepped into a hospital, I never knew what kind of situation or condition I would encounter - it could be a wide range of ailments.

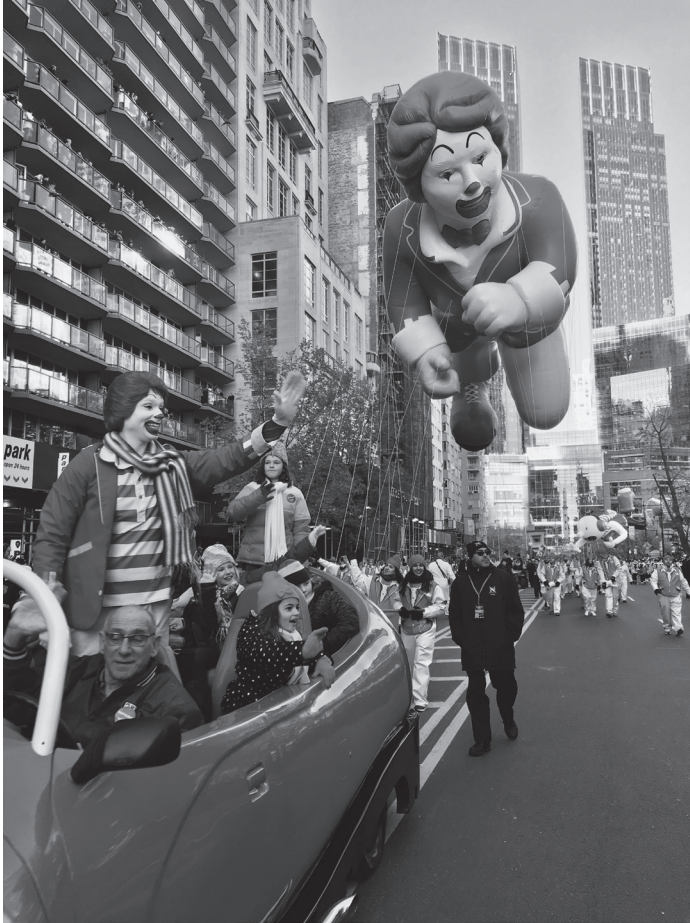
During one visit, I walked into a patient's room around eight or nine years old. I handed him a toy and engaged in my usual routine of entertaining the audience in the room. Laughter filled the air as the child, and his mother had a great time. Suddenly, I heard what sounded like water pouring, like a pipe bursting. To my surprise, it turned out that the child had laughed so hard that he had accidentally relieved himself. The mother took it in good humor, and so did we. We bid our goodbyes and quickly left the room, trying not to make a big deal out of it. It was a one-of-a-kind experience for me because it was the first and only time I knew of when I made someone laugh so hard that they relieved themselves. This encounter highlighted the power of laughter and its profound impact on someone's emotions - whether it be tears of joy or, in this case, an unexpected accident!

From the moment I landed the Ronald gig, I was determined to exceed everyone's expectations and had fixed my focus on becoming the Ronald in the most prestigious event the character had ever been a part of – the annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City. That dream became a reality in April of 2017 when I received a call from Cw, asking me to be “the” Ronald in the 93rd Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Of course, I jumped at the opportunity to be in one of the largest parades in the United States. They offered to cover all expenses, so we decided to fly a few days early and soak in the sights of the Big Apple.



STRIKING A POSE WITH THE “McKIDS” IN THE PARADE!

That year, a remarkable 4 million people lined the two-and-a-half-mile parade route while an additional 50 million watched from the comfort of their homes. It’s an indescribable sensation to travel down the streets of New York City and be recognized by everyone from five to ninety-five. As I stood in the enormous red shoe car, waving to the parade attendees, it felt surreal to witness families on their apartment balconies, people leaning out of windows, and screaming “Ronald” from every side. It was a unique experience where I had the best of both worlds. I had the celebrity status, yet I could easily transition back to being me by removing my red smile, and nobody would know it was me. It was indeed a blessing to have that kind of anonymity.



**WAVING TO THE SPECTATORS IN THE 93RD ANNUAL MACY'S THANKSGIVING DAY
PARADE IN NEW YORK CITY. WHAT A RUSH!**

A couple of days later, filled with excitement, we returned to Tampa to take part in a Christmas parade in a charming small town in Central Florida. I couldn't help but constantly gaze upwards, almost expecting to see towering skyscrapers lining the parade route. It took a conscious effort to remind myself that I was no longer in New York City, with massive crowds. Instead, there were only a few thousand people in attendance.

Later that year, I received the heartbreaking news that the Ronald McDonald program would cease to exist as of January 1, 2018. Brandon and I had recently built a house, got married, and had discussed our desire to adopt. I had three more years on my contract and didn't know what to do.

In disbelief, I immediately contacted Bob Conigliaro, the Vice President of Community Relations at Caspers Company, who greatly supported the program. Caspers Company, which owned 60 locations in Tampa Bay and significantly influenced the McDonald's system, frequently hired us for parades, grand openings, and company events. I felt compelled to inform Bob about the situation since he had been instrumental in handpicking me for this role when I auditioned. He reassured me not to worry and insisted that everything would work out.

After weeks had gone by without any updates about the program's impending closure, Bob called me out of the blue and requested that I visit Caspers' corporate office for a conversation. I entered and anxiously sat, unsure why I had been summoned.

Bob began by explaining that after I had shared the devastating news with him, he spoke with Rudy Garcia, President of Caspers Company. Rudy talked with Blake Casper, CEO of the organization, and suggested it might be an opportune time to bring me on board. Bob then revealed that Caspers planned to create a new position within the department, Community Relations Manager. Furthermore, Bob explained that I would step into his role once he retired. I couldn't believe it. Was this some elaborate joke? I was in utter disbelief.

After spending approximately an hour with Bob, I visited the Rudy's office for a conversation with him, followed by a meeting with Blake. We sat at his marble table, positioned next to the sole window in his corner executive office. Blake reiterated the news about Caspers creating a role for me and assured me I would eventually fill Bob's position once he retired. Caspers had a reputation internally for preparing a "bench" of potential leaders for executives close to retiring by selecting promising individuals and grooming them for future leadership roles.

During our conversation, Blake shared something that still warms my heart. He mentioned how he always observed my remarkable talent for connecting with people and making them feel valued whenever he saw me at events. He said, “You may not have realized it, but every time I witnessed you in action, you were on an audition. I would think, damn, this guy can do so much more than just apply clown makeup.” He advised me never to lose my sense of humor, as he believed it was the attribute he admired most in me.

I was at a loss for words, not knowing how to react. Once again, I found myself in a state of absolute shock, and trying to process all the information was overwhelming emotionally. Blake asked if there was anything else I wanted to discuss, and I mustered the courage to say yes. Despite having four years remaining on my five-year contract and receiving a severance from McDonald’s, I felt it wasn’t appropriate I was being forced to use that money to cover the cost of debranding the program vehicles, especially since the shutting down of the program was out of my control. Surprisingly, Blake agreed, and our conversation came to an end.

Just moments later, as I was driving away from Caspers’ corporate office, my phone rang. I was informed that my severance had been increased by an additional \$15K to cover the expenses of debranding the vehicles. In that instant, I realized I had discovered a leader who would prioritize my well-being and consistently make ethical choices. It became clear that I had finally found my ideal environment with perfect leadership.

It was an honor to be chosen to join the Community Relations department of such a prestigious company, known for its outstanding work with employees and the community. During the hiring process, it was repeatedly mentioned to me how uncommon it was for Caspers to hire externally, as they highly valued internal promotions. Hiring internally for leadership roles allowed all employees to advance and succeed within the organization rather than be limited to just a few individuals. I also discovered that positions only opened up in the office

if someone retired or passed away, so landing this role felt like hitting the jackpot, and I couldn't be happier.

A few invaluable life lessons that have shaped my perspective after this experience:

- It's crucial to remember that you never know who may be watching you or the impact you may have on someone. Whether it's a casual interaction or a more significant encounter, striving to be at your best is essential because you never know when you might be unknowingly auditioning for something more significant. However, it's equally important to remember that authenticity matters above all else. Regardless of the influence or power someone may hold, it's crucial to remain authentic and not hide behind false identities. In any interactions I've ever had, from the C-suite to an hourly employee, it's always been important to remember that I am always me, first and foremost. People possess the remarkable capability to see beyond any pretense and discern the genuine essence of a person, and this is ultimately the most significant aspect.
- I had been given the opportunity of a lifetime, one that could have a positive impact not only within an organization and its employees but also among a larger external audience. Recall the symbolic golden key I mentioned earlier in Chapter 2? Like golden keys, such moments are bestowed upon each of us in our lives, offering us a chance to surpass our perceived limitations and achieve greatness, but only if we remain receptive and embrace these blessings with open hearts and minds.
- Rather than engaging in activities solely to seek rewards, it is essential to prioritize actions that align with your natural inclinations. While recognition is valuable for fostering a healthy company culture and boosting personal self-esteem, it should not be the driving force behind your actions. Instead, seek internal satisfaction by knowing your contributions positively impact the

greater good. **IGNITE** *your inner fire* and find happiness while doing what you love. And if you receive acknowledgment for a job well done, embrace the moment and trust that the universe will always reward your efforts when you give your best.

- Use your voice and advocate for yourself. I remember the valuable advice of Bob Conigliaro, who emphasized the importance of self-advocacy. He often said, “Take a moment to look over your shoulder and straight down. What do you see? Your back. You must speak up for yourself and do what’s best for you because nobody else will have your back like you.” I received the additional dollars necessary to debrand the program vehicles because I spoke up and voiced my concerns. This experience reminds us how many opportunities we miss because we don’t use our voices. It was a valuable lesson that taught me never to be silent.