

Perspective on the Basics – What Exactly is “Being a Clown?”

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When you think about being a clown, it all seems like a tremendous project with so very much to learn and perfect. Where do you start? What do you do first? How exactly does one become a clown?

I’ll never forget the first year as a member of my shrine clown unit. The idea of being a clown for the most respected fraternity in the world was a really big deal for me. There were so many new people to meet and so many names to learn. And, there was really, so much to learn, too. I had never done anything like this before. I’d have to go to Clown School and learn make-up application, costuming, balloon sculpting, magic tricks, puppetry, mime, props, skit development and so much more. It seemed like a huge undertaking but I was told that I should concentrate on just one thing at a time. And so I did.

I began with make-up application. My mentor was U-No the Clown and he was a painter by trade. I went to his house on a daily basis for months on end to learn the complicated process of professional clown make-up. Starting as a Whiteface clown, we designed a face which would eventually become my trademark. Fifteen years later, my whiteface still looks very much as it did way back then. Of course, I expanded my make-up and costumes over the years to also become proficient in Auguste and Hobo styles, in addition to becoming a Character Clown, using a variety of these styles until finally choosing one for each character.

I was immediately interested in learning balloon sculpting and I first learned to make a sword and a poodle. I remember the days when even those simple creations were a “work of art.” Then, my friend Salty taught me how to make a teddy bear. To this day, that is my favorite, and the one I do more than any other.

The classes I attended in my unit’s own clown school taught me many things. I learned that I should become skilled in many areas, which would allow me to be entertaining to a variety of audiences. I learned that I would find myself with children most often but there would also be many times when I would be in front of an adult audience, including parades and visits to hospitals or nursing homes. Obviously I would need to expand my knowledge and learn a variety of skills.

I was nervous that I might not be able to learn everything. Would I be able to make all of those complicated and requested balloons? Would my make-up look OK? Would I be able to design a costume? Would I be able to choose a clown character and create a costume and personality for my chosen character? Would I be able to do all this? It all seemed so intimidating and so difficult.

My background was in sales and management. And, I was married and I have a daughter. Fortunately for me, my experiences in dealing with so many types of people in my everyday life gave me many of the “people skills” which are so important to clowning. With people skills, you can interact with your audience. You can communicate with them. Clowns are entertainers who interact with their audience. We are not just “someone who puts on make-up and silly clothing.” We are not “window dressing.” We are not “stand-up comics.” We are not “joke-tellers.” We are professional entertainers and we have one goal. We provide entertainment for an audience which allows them to escape from their current realities and be relieved from their stress, troubles, sorrow or otherwise lackluster state of mind. This requires interaction and communication. And this is something that must be worked on and cultivated. This must be accomplished over time by educating yourself and practicing until you can see smiles on faces simply by approaching your audience. This takes work.

Without a doubt, the most influential advice to me came from an experienced member of my clown unit. His name was Chuckles and he has long since moved away. Actually, I never heard from him again but his kind words of advice have stayed with me for the last fifteen years. We were talking about the many things I needed to learn and the time I would need to devote to my new chosen lifestyle. He said, “If you need the costume and make-up to be a clown, you’ll never become a good clown. You have to be a clown on the inside before you become one on the outside.”

What did Chuckles mean by that? He related to me a story about once when he was on an airplane and a child was crying. Chuckles always had something with him to entertain someone if the opportunity presented itself. He was always ready to help someone to laugh or to help that lonely person through a difficult time. It was understood that as a clown he should be able to create a diversion for someone who temporarily needed an escape from the reality of the time. This exercise would bring his intended audience into a world of fantasy where troubles and sorrow didn’t exist. On that airplane, he performed some little magic trick from his pocket and that crying child was mesmerized by this talented and personable individual. Chuckles actually transformed a likely, miserable flight into an easy and enjoyable trip. And the memory of helping a crying child stayed with him long enough to be communicated to me. That day, there was no clown costume and no clown make-up. The clown on the inside of Chuckles came through and the lesson of that day lives on with me. That’s the basic magic of being a clown.

So, after 15 years in this business, was that the best thing that I’ve been able to learn? You bet it was. I learned that being a clown was something almost spiritual. It was much more than make-up and a costume. It was much more than performing a trick or making a balloon. It was the interaction between two people. That was the basic truth back then and for me will always be the most important key to clowning.

Now if you are a new member of your clown unit, please take my advice. When you are finding your way as a clown, remember that there is certainly a lot to learn in this wonderful business of clowning. You should want to look your best as a clown. You should want to be able to entertain your audience with your talents, whatever they may be. And you should always strive to interact with your audience to make them feel good and smile.

How do you do that? How will you know when you've done things right? Here's my suggestion:

Practice putting on your makeup and work with your fellow clowns to get better and better. Listen to their helpful voice of experience. And remember that the more you invest into your new endeavor, the more benefits you will reap.

Demand excellence from yourself and have pride in yourself and your fraternity.

Remember that you represent the World's Greatest Fraternity.

Learn one thing at a time and become an expert at that one thing before you try something new. If that means to make your clown make-up the best possible clown make-up, then do that. If that means to make the world's best balloon sword, then do that and make the world's best balloon sword. If that means to make your parade prop the best parade prop, then do that. It is certainly better to be known for doing one thing great than for doing several things with "less-than-stellar" results. And never forget that you do this all "for the kids," no matter how old they may be.

If you have some advice that was communicated to you which was important in your development as a clown, please consider sending it to Geno, your editor at Clown Alley. Also, consider that Clown Alley would be a great place to share your stories and your clown experiences. I'm sure that if Geno receives your stories, he would consider a new column in Clown Alley called "The ISCA Forum" for the purpose of communicating your experiences and stories.

Thanks for taking the time to read my story. And, as always - "Keep Smiling !!!"

Do-No