

My name is Clown

By Bonnie McKenna

“Some people call this a job, but it really is a life career,” said Clown as he began blowing up a balloon for me that he would twist into a flower. “I have been blowing balloons for 24 years, and I never miss a day.”

Clown is one of the many characters who work on the streets of New Orleans in the French Quarter. Clown can be found on the corner of Rue St. Ann and Decatur next to Jackson Square; that is his place business.

Curious whether this man had another life, a professional life and balloon blowing was just something he did for the fun-of-it, I asked, “Do you have another job?”

He cocked his head, blue eyes twinkling in the morning light as he looked at me and said, “I learned my skill from a man named Frank. I saved his life. Teaching me about balloons was all he had to repay me with. I did not want any payment and in fact I did not want to go out in public and blow up balloons, but here I am.”

Frank, he said, learned his skill from a master balloon blower who used to work for Ringling Brothers. That guy told Frank that it was his job to pass the skill on to someone else.

“Frank,” Clown continued, “was a Viet Nam Vet., he blew balloons during the day as a way to make some income. I met Frank in a bar, he was an alcoholic and a real nice guy; I took a shine to him.

“When I learned he did not have a place to stay and was sleeping under the wharf near the Café Du Monde; I became concerned.”

At that time there was a gang of four thugs working the French Quarter stealing money from anyone that was sleeping or passed out on the streets. They would slit their victim’s pockets or bags to get at the money. If they woke up and put up a fuss they would be killed. The thugs knew when the vets or the homeless got their disability or pension check; that’s when they would attack.

“I feared for Frank’s life, so I decided to rent Frank a room in the same flop-house I was staying in, rent was only \$35 a week.

“That night I met Frank in his favorite bar. I gave him the key to the room and after a time he promised he would go there. I did not hold out much hope because he was drunk, but he did.”

Over the next several weeks Clown said he did not see much of Frank, but knew he was still staying in his room. Frank sobered up and began going to AA and in the months, that followed, he went back to school and graduated with a degree in environment engineering, specifically learning how to clean up toxic waste.

“During that time, I lost my job as a dishwasher,” Clown said. “I had some money saved up; \$8,000 to be exact, so I did not have to work. I loved it, I just hung out ‘cause it did not cost me much to live.”

Frank told Clown, that since he had saved his life, he was going to repay his debt to him by teaching him how-to blow-up balloons.

“I told him I did not need the money, and I was not interested in learning to blow up balloons, but he continued to insist. Finally, I caved in.”

For three weeks they sat in Clown's room while Frank taught him how to blow up balloons, put on clown make-up and tell jokes.

"Frank kept insisting I go out on the street and try my hand at balloon blowing," Clown admitted. "I kept resisting."

One day, shortly after the World's Fair, Clown told Frank, "If you will stop badgering me, I will go out, but only for 30 minutes and without the clown make-up.

"I went down to the street, put my hat down, as Frank taught me and within minutes I had people standing around. After 30 minutes I made \$50.

"I realized then that this was fun. I have been doing this now for 24 years, everyday. I love it," Clown said with his big clown grin.

Clown handed me my balloon flower as I pressed some money into his hand thanking him for his story.

I was reminded that people are not always what they seem to be and by talking to them, you discover they have many interesting things to tell, if we only take time to listen.

As I started to walk away, I turned and asked him his name, he said, "My name is Clown and that is with a capital C."

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