

Where's My Ronald?

by Dorg

As I frantically bounced from one clown to another I wondered if I would ever find my Ronald. The one I came with. All of the Ronald McDonalds in the room looked identical. Each one of them deceptively hiding behind a veil of silliness. Thick white pancake make-up, fluorescent orange electrified hair and big red floppy shoes. As I hopefully looked deep into each Ronald's eyes, past their bright cherry-red eyeliner and exaggerated black U-shaped eyebrows, I felt as if I were trapped in some 1960s Fellini horror film. I began to panic. Surrounded by over 150 of these grotesque burger icons, what could I do but continue to desperately search for my Ronald?

How did I get here, anyway? Well, in 1983 I was hired by a large western Canadian advertising agency called Palmer Jarvis. The agency's biggest client was McDonald's Restaurants, and I was assigned to work on their account full-time for four years. At the time, McDonald's had over 120 advertising agencies around the world. Palmer Jarvis handled their advertising and promotions and the care and feeding of Ronald McDonald for western Canada. It was a dream job for me and the break that I was waiting for at the tender age of twenty-three. Needless to say, I took every aspect of the job very seriously.

I was well suited to the position, because I truly was fascinated by McDonald's , their history, their systems, their culture and excellent marketing campaigns. It all interested me and I totally immersed myself in the job. I learned that the success of McDonald's was largely built on their ability to deliver a consistent product. A Big Mac tasted the same worldwide, and advertisements for a Big Mac looked the same worldwide too. I remember that whenever we did any hamburger photography we would actually fly in a "food stylist" from McDonald's worldwide headquarters to supervise the look of the burger. All together in attendance at these meticulous and extremely expensive burger photo shoots, you would find a highly paid food stylist with two food stylist assistants, one local photographer, a lighting person, a photographer's assistant, a couple of executives from McDonald's and a lowly account person from the advertising agency , me.

The food stylist primped the lettuce on the Big Mac, lightly misting it with her shiny aerosol spray, and carefully placing each sesame seed onto the bun, in the exact right spot, with her tweezers. It was painstakingly detailed work. The texture of the buns, the fat bubbles on the ground beef, the lighting, the background, the focal length , everything had to be perfect to create that mouth-watering shot that would be reproduced millions of times in an advertising campaign. It could take days to get that sensational burger photograph. And it always came in at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars for just one "beauty shot." But cost didn't matter to McDonald's as long as the burger had that universal, consistent look. Consistency, consistency , consistency in everything. You didn't want to be singled out as the advertising agency that launched a campaign featuring

a listless, inconsistent-looking burger. In the cutthroat world of advertising there were hundreds of agencies waiting in the wings to steal an account, especially such a lucrative and high-profile account as McDonald's.

So it should come as no surprise that McDonald's had a Ronald McDonald program with very high and extremely consistent standards set for each of its markets around the world. Every Ronald adhered to a strict code of conduct, including specific and very carefully detailed guidelines for his appearance and behaviour. The advertising agencies ran the program for a hefty fee, and at one point in my career I was in charge of the Ronald McDonald program for British Columbia.

Now I am going to let you in on a bunch of trade secrets that the average person doesn't know. First of all, McDonald's had one main Ronald McDonald clown that was used in international TV commercials. When I worked on the account from 1983 to 1989, the main TV Ronald was a guy named King Moody. This was his stage name; his real name was never to be revealed. You've seen him thousands of times and would instantly recognize him. He became a wealthy man through the residual fees he received from playing the role. But every market or trading area also had a local Ronald McDonald who was used for regional promotional purposes. These Ronalds were used for live appearances, not for TV commercials. An actor was hired and worked full-time, appearing locally at parades, hospital visits, kids' birthday parties, restaurant grand openings, telethons etc., etc., etc.

But wait, it gets better. There was not just a Ronald; he travelled with a whole gang of characters and a complete program. There were five or six other McDonaldland characters who appeared with Ronald. I think you know exactly who I am talking about and sadly enough, would recognize all of them: Mayor McCheese, the Hamburglar, Grimlace, Birdie the Early Bird, the French Fry Guys and others. McDonald's worldwide headquarters in Oak Brook, Illinois, provided each agency with expensive, colourful, state-of-the-art costumes and, unlike Ronald, they included masks so you couldn't really tell who was inside. Grimlace was my favourite character. He was that goofy, stupid-looking, giant purple pear-shaped creature that just kind of wandered around. After years of working on the program, I learned that he was supposed to be a giant taste bud. According to the Ronald McDonald Program Manual issued by Oak Brook, none of the characters was allowed to talk at appearances. Pretty well anybody could be a Grimlace, or any other McDonaldland character, for that matter, and we usually just hired crew kids for these supporting roles.

But being Ronald, now that was a different story. He was the star. This was a forty-hour-a-week job that required a long list of skills and attributes. First of all, you had to be a crafty magician. This was probably one of the most important talents, because Ronald performed lots of magic tricks in his shows at restaurants throughout the province. The packaged show was a thirty-minute skit called the Big Red Shoe Review. It generally took place in restaurant parking lots on a Saturday afternoon and was carefully scripted and choreographed. The kids loved to watch it and went apoplectic when Ronald made his entrance on stage. The show reinforced all sorts of important values like child safety

while travelling in cars, listening to your parents, doing your homework and, of course, the most important lesson of all: stick to a well-balanced diet with plenty of tasty McDonald's food. It was blatant juvenile corporate propaganda. It was banal and harmless with a silly and fun theme, aimed at an audience just beginning to develop brand loyalty. And Ronald was the pitch man. To be a good local Ronald, aside from being a convincing, sincere spokesperson, you had to like kids, be funny, walk with a clown-like gait and be comfortable in large shoes. Oh yes, a love of french fries was a definite asset too.

One of the more peculiar demands of the job involved a contract that McDonald's worldwide headquarters insisted that all the Ronalds sign. The contract had a carefully worded "nondisclosure" clause. It actually stated that in your role as Ronald McDonald you were not allowed to reveal to others what you did. You were to keep the fact that you were Ronald McDonald a secret. The main reason for this was that McDonald's was trying to create an illusion that there was only one Ronald out there, kind of like Santa Claus. So if you were a six-year-old at a store grand opening in Burnaby, let's say, and Ronald showed up, you would naturally assume it was the same Ronald from the TV commercial. The one and only Ronald. If individual Ronalds in each market revealed their true identities, the secret might get out and it could topple the entire burger empire.

I always felt that the nondisclosure stipulation was extremely onerous. I mean, what did the Ronalds tell their wives? How could they keep it a secret? I imagined Ronald husbands around the world on Saturday afternoons saying, "Honey, I just have to go out and do something for a few hours. I'll be back later." Then after a while I could see Ronald wives getting wise to the whole kooky charade. "Sweetheart, how come whenever you are not here, there is always a Ronald McDonald appearance somewhere in town, and how come I have never seen you and Ronald in the same room together?" The contract clearly stated that Ronalds who revealed their true names would be in breach of their contracts. I never asked our Ronald much about his personal life and never found out how he worked his way around protecting his secret identity.

The Wall Street Journal once even reported on this phenomenon through a quirky little story in a section of the newspaper dedicated to the lighter side of things. Here is the direct transcript of the story:

Headline: WHEN IT COMES TO RONALD McDONALD, McDONALD'S DOESN'T CLOWN AROUND

Story: McDonald's won't even admit that there is more than one Ronald. So protective is McDonald's of the character's mystique that men who play Ronald are never to admit that they do. Ronalds in costume aren't to say who they are in civilian life. That rather annoyed Craig A. Oatten, a police officer in Michigan, when Ronald McDonald, in full red and yellow regalia, got into a fender-bender near Saginaw a few years ago. Asked several times, the Ronald steadfastly refused to give his name for the police report. "If we get someone who refuses to identify themselves, we'll take them to the local jail," says Chief Oatten. But because there were no injuries involved, he says he spared the clown a trip downtown.

So in British Columbia, as in Michigan, as in every other developed market in the world, we had a dedicated top-secret Ronald McDonald, half a dozen McDonaldland characters, a person who handled the bookings, a person who drove the truck and a person to manage it all. Me. I recruited and hired them all. The truck driver was an old retired BC Transit bus driver named Max, who was famous for driving his bus every year at Christmas in Vancouver's West End dressed up as Santa. Can you think of better credentials for the job of being Ronald's driver? We had portable stages, sound systems, dozens of props and two big trucks. This was an elaborate, well-oiled fast-food travelling circus.

It cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to keep the program up and running. But money was never a problem. Each McDonald's restaurant in British Columbia was obligated, under the terms of its franchise agreement, to contribute four per cent of its gross food sales to an advertising and promotional fund. The money for the Ronald program came out of this fund. In exchange for this contribution, the individual McDonald's franchisees received a long list of advertising and promotional benefits, including two Ronald McDonald appearances a year at the restaurant they owned. I oversaw the business side.

Most of the guys who owned these restaurants were busy millionaires. Having bought a McDonald's franchise at the right time, in the '70s or early '80s, meant you were almost guaranteed to become a millionaire. They were all rich, and happy to pay whatever it cost to deliver a high-quality clown to their restaurant parking lot or lobby twice a year. They also needed to be assured that all the other McDonald's corporate Ronald obligations such as parades, telethons, hospital visits and so on were taken care of in an extremely professional manner. The agency made a healthy profit off the fee we charged, the Ronald appearances always received rave reviews, burger sales were brisk and everybody was McHappy.

Ronald was probably the happiest. He made a ton of dough. As a matter of fact, I remember one of the things that really irked me about running the program was that Ronald McDonald made twice as much money per year as I made. Here I am, this young ambitious executive, wearing a suit and tie to work every day, working hard at a prestigious big-city ad agency, and this clown makes more than me. What's wrong with this picture? I would give him a performance review once a year and he still always asked for a raise!

Since our agency ran the McDonald's account for all of western Canada, we also employed full-time Ronalds in Calgary, Edmonton, Regina and Winnipeg. I knew them all, and if my Ronald was sick or on holidays I might occasionally have to fly another one in for an appearance. It was a true burger brotherhood. The show must go on, and Ronald never, ever missed an appearance. Never.

Every two years McDonald's held a worldwide convention for all of the Ronalds and agency managers. If there is one thing that McDonald's did well, it was staging big, elaborate, expensive conventions. They had huge managers' conventions, conventions for people who created TV commercials, conventions for the restaurant owners, conventions

for their lawyers, conventions for store supervisors. And dozens of other conventions. Each convention always had to be more lavish, extravagant and impressive than the last one. And the best convention of them all was the Ronald McDonald convention.

Naturally, I desperately wanted to attend one of them. And when George Jarvis, the founder and owner of the advertising agency, told me I would be going to the next Ronald convention, I was so excited I almost had a Big Mac attack. Ronald and I were to fly to McDonald's worldwide headquarters at Oak Brook, a suburb of Chicago. I had read several books about the company's founder, Ray Kroc, and knew all about the famous Oak Brook headquarters. I owned shares in the corporation and devoured the annual reports I was sent, memorizing all of the company's officers' names. I was dying to meet all of the senior American executives, who I knew would be attending the convention. And best of all, I was looking forward to walking on the hallowed grounds of Hamburger University.

This particular convention was to take place on the famous campus where McDonald's ran intensive training sessions for all of their management personnel. It was a huge campus called Hamburger University on a large treed acreage adjacent to McDonald's head office buildings. Staff from all over the world came here for their indoctrination into the McDonald's system and to receive their degree in "flipology." You think I am kidding, but I'm not. I told you that this corporation was obsessed with consistency. How do you think they attained it? When management personnel got to a certain level in the McDonald's system, they were required to attend a two-week session at Hamburger University. So I never made it to Harvard, Yale or Cambridge. Who cares? Hamburger University is where it's at!

As the plane touched down at Chicago's O'Hare airport, I thought about all the Ronalds from all over the world who were also making their way to Oak Brook. Like those swallows that return every year to Capistrano, every two years all of the Ronald McDonalds in the world migrated to Hamburger University. Isn't nature wonderful?

A limo picked us up at the airport and drove us directly to the campus. My nose was pressed up against the window as we drove past the massive head office of the company that Ray Kroc founded in 1955. Since then McDonald's had grown to a massive corporation with operations in more than seventy countries, an advertising budget unmatched by any other single brand, and more retail outlets than any other merchant. And here I was, at the centre of it all.

That evening, after getting changed, we headed to a welcoming cocktail party hosted by the president of McDonald's. Dress was business casual, and we mingled with one another while eating delicious little round sandwiches stuffed with beef and asparagus and sipping on drinks. The other four western Canadian Ronalds were all there, along with their agency management people, whom I also knew. Ronald and I got to sleep that night at a decent hour, wanting to be fully rested for the next three days of activities.

The plenary session that kicked off the convention the next morning was attended by all 150 Ronalds (dressed in street clothes) and 150 advertising agency managers. You have to remember that most of these Ronalds are total egomaniacs, prima donnas and show-offs. They have a deep-down intrinsic need to always be the centre of attention. Many of them were the class clowns in high school and have turned that extraverted behaviour into a lucrative vocation. You cannot imagine what it was like to have 150 of them in the same room. Whoever was speaking at the lectern didn't stand a chance. All the Ronalds were yacking away to each other, telling jokes, making fart sounds, chucking spitballs, doing sight gags, getting up and taking pratfalls, and just generally clowning around through the whole presentation. It wasn't until a presentation the next day that I would witness the Ronalds in a more subdued and serious state of mind. I'll tell you about that session later in this story.

That morning after the emcee reviewed the day's agenda, he introduced McDonald's Senior Vice-President of Worldwide Marketing, who welcomed the unruly Ronalds. He gave them a predictable pep talk on how the Ronalds were the cornerstone of the company's worldwide youth marketing program and how their individual efforts had built the program into what it was today: the industry standard in mascot exploitation.

The corporation tracked Ronald's popularity annually, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on consumer research. The big question that they were interested in was this: among the target group, children two to twelve, just how recognizable was Ronald in unaided tests? In other words, youngsters were simply shown a picture of Ronald during the research sessions and asked who it was. McDonald's was also interested in how recognizable Ronald was when compared with other children's icons, such as Mickey Mouse, Santa Claus, the Burger King and the Wendy's girl. The results for that year placed Ronald just below Santa Claus, with the Disney Mouse running a distant third. Something like an amazing ninety-six per cent of kids in that target age group, when shown a picture of the slap-happy hamburger clown, could identify him as Ronald McDonald. In the entire world, the only person more recognizable to kids was Santa Claus. The two other burger chain mascots barely even registered on the scale. McDonald's attributed Santa's runaway popularity to the simple fact that he had been around for longer. Slick graphs and charts illustrated all the points that the speaker wanted to hit home. The main message was, "We won't stop till we're number one." Look out, Santa, we'll out-promote, out-spend and out-smart you, fatso! In the dog-eat-dog battle for toddlers' share of mind, old Saint Nick had a formidable opponent. Bah humbug!

After that uplifting good-news opening, we took a trip down Memory Lane and watched a fifteen-minute historical reel of Ronald McDonald TV commercials. Willard Scott, the American TV weatherman, was the first TV Ronald, and he debuted the character in 1963 (much to the chagrin of the corporation, this is a widely known piece of early pop culture trivia). It was an emotional twenty years of commercials featuring Ronald from all the different eras and ending with the latest series of Ronald commercials starring King Moody.

The speaker ended his presentation with a commitment to the Ronalds that McDonald's Corporation would continue to spend heavily on children's advertising that promoted Ronald. He reviewed the worldwide advertising budget for commercials featuring Ronald, and it was staggering. Hundreds of millions of dollars! The clowns in the room ate it up. It was music to their ears and they loved it all. They always knew they were famous, but the future looked even brighter, with the corporation ensuring that their worldwide popularity and global domination would flourish.

The rest of the convention involved several different break-out sessions and workshops. For most of the three-day program, the Ronalds and advertising managers would attend separate sessions. Ronald sessions included workshops on make-up application, a session where a new Ronald show would be unveiled, a child psychologist had even been brought in to lecture on kids' behaviour and why they identify with Ronald. A performance by a very famous magician was also scheduled, with a question-and-answer period where he would reveal the secrets to his tricks, something that is very rarely done. The advertising executives' seminars were a bit more serious. We had a session reviewing insurance issues involved with running the Ronald program. Another session looked at budgeting and managing expenses, while another one introduced us to new suppliers of show props and costumes. Our workshops also gave us a chance to compare our Ronald marketing plans with our colleagues'. I was interested to learn more about how many shows and appearances other Ronalds did annually, and I was especially interested to learn how much money they were paid each year.

Many of the men attending the convention were "career Ronalds" and had been working their markets since the inception of the program, some of them for up to fifteen years. Others were newcomers being welcomed to one of the world's strangest secret fraternities. The frequency of the conventions, every two years, gave them an opportunity to develop ongoing relationships with one another.

I certainly enjoyed all the sessions I attended and was keen to meet important advertising agency executives from other markets too. It was a great way to network. Who knows when you might have to look to advance your career by moving to another advertising agency? And I was proud to work for Palmer Jarvis. In 1977 George Jarvis came up with the idea of a kids' magazine themed around Ronald McDonald and the McDonaldland characters. It was called Funtimes and was originally distributed only in western Canada. After the free in-store give-away magazine had become successful in western Canada, McDonald's Corporation in Oak Brook invited Palmer Jarvis to create several worldwide editions of the magazine in different languages. It was given away at thousands of restaurants in dozens of countries and grew to be the largest-circulation children's magazine in the world. Hundreds of millions of copies of the magazine were printed. And somehow Palmer Jarvis managed to keep the project, running it out of our Vancouver office. We had half a dozen full-time writers and artists designing the quarterly comic book. We were trusted to be the custodian of the cartoon Ronald image globally. Year after year our creative team delivered a consistent cartoon Ronald to children in every corner of the world. That was one of the things that I loved about the McDonald's system. If you had a good idea, the sky was the limit. When I introduced myself to agency people at the

convention from Japan, Australia or Germany and told them I worked for Palmer Jarvis, they immediately made the connection to Ronald's Funtimes Magazine.

At each convention the Ronalds always looked forward to the presentation of the highly coveted Big Red Shoe award. McDonald's would choose the one Ronald who had gone above and beyond the call of clown duty, whether it be through extra community service, exemplary commitment, creative brilliance or an act of bravery and good judgment, as was the case with this particular year's recipient. The Big Red Shoe award was a big deal to these guys. With their super-sized egos, you can bet they wanted the peer recognition that came along with this biennial corporate accolade. To be singled out as the one Ronald, of all the Ronalds, who deserved global recognition was indeed an honour. Strictly from a business point of view, it was important to the advertising agencies too. To be able to go back to your local McDonald's client and be able to claim that, under the supervision of your advertising agency, your Ronald had been awarded the Big Red Shoe award, would ensure that you kept the profitable account for years to come.

As the second day of the convention unfolded and we got closer to the evening's award ceremony, the tension mounted, rumours circulated and speculation was rampant, every Ronald wondering which one of them would take home the celebrated Big Red Shoe award. The trophy ended up going to a Ronald from just outside of Detroit, who had taken what could have been a public relations nightmare and turned it around into a corporate media coup. The award winner who I will just call Phil (I don't want to reveal his true identity), had been a Ronald for only four years. Earlier that year a new McDonald's had opened within his trading area, and he had been brought in for the Grand Opening. Nothing unusual about that. In full Ronald costume he was flown in by helicopter. An area of the restaurant parking lot had been cleared for the helicopter's landing. A bit unusual, but given the fact that it was a grand opening the owner of the restaurant wanted a grand Ronald entrance. Here is where it gets interesting. The helicopter crashed. Now that was unusual!

As the helicopter was landing, its propeller hit a power line at about thirty feet above the ground. The helicopter instantly crashed to the ground, injuring a bystander and the pilot. A small fire was put out quickly. Glass, debris and the twisted wreck of a helicopter lay below the colourful banners and balloons set up for the grand opening. Ronald wasn't hurt, but he was understandably shaken. Hundreds of customers, in the parking lot waiting for Ronald's arrival and the Grand Opening, witnessed the horrific sight. The injured pilot and bystander were rushed to hospital and Ronald was quickly escorted into the restaurant's basement to recuperate. Ambulances and fire trucks were everywhere. The mishap was quickly turning into a media feeding frenzy. A local radio station was already on site, booked to do promotional on-air cut-ins for the restaurant's grand opening. Immediately after the crash they began live reporting, focusing their story on Ronald being on board the ill-fated copter. They erroneously reported that he had been seriously injured or killed.

The tragic news spread quickly, and when the news wire services got hold of the story it began to run nationally: "A helicopter carrying Ronald McDonald has crashed on the outskirts of Detroit. At this point it is not known if Ronald McDonald is alive." Within an hour, dozens of newspapers, radio and TV stations had made the short trip from Detroit to

this particular restaurant. When they arrived on the scene, they got sketchy and conflicting word that Ronald was still alive and holed up in the restaurant's basement. Of course they all wanted a sound bite from Ronald describing what happened. The restaurant owner wasn't equipped to handle this type of media pressure, dozens of reporters banging on his store's front doors demanding an interview with the survivor clown. The owner desperately called the McDonald's public relations department in Oak Brook for some much-needed guidance. They were unable to get to the scene for at least four hours, and this poor guy needed immediate crisis management. Reporters were already asking him what the real name of the Ronald was, how long he had been a Ronald, and a bunch of other taboo questions that should never be answered; let alone answered on television!

Then Ronald came to the rescue with a plan that would later that year earn Phil the Big Red Shoe Award. After over two hours hiding in the restaurant's basement, Phil knew he had to make a move. The longer he waited, the more impatient, agitated and inquisitive the reporters became. The restaurant owner had also been monitoring TV and radio reports from the restaurant's basement. With no hard facts to go on, the media were beginning to speculate that Ronald had been seriously injured or killed. As long as the reporters were kept at bay, those erroneous reports would only gain momentum and spread.

Phil knew that the restaurant was totally surrounded by reporters. He decided to hold his head up high and proudly leave in full costume, faithfully upholding the Ronald Oath of non-disclosure. He carefully and quickly reapplied his face paint, straightened out his costume and faced the anxious mob. As he emerged from the restaurant's front doors, a large media scrum immediately engulfed him, microphones waving in his face, all the reporters asking the same questions: "What's your real name? Where are you from? How old are you? Who are you really? Come on, tell us your real name?" To each question Phil categorically replied in his simple, innocent voice, "I'm Ronald McDonald."

The reporters became angry and continued shouting at him, "Who are you really?" He continued to simply reply, "I'm Ronald McDonald." They wouldn't bite, and the situation was quickly escalating into an uncontrollable communications disaster. Then, still within character, Phil said, "Look, I'm Ronald McDonald. I'm not going to co-operate with you unless you play by my rules. I have a great story for you, but let's get one thing straight right now, I'm Ronald McDonald. If you continue along the lines of asking me who I really am, then I am afraid this impromptu press conference is over and you can wait for an official press release of the incident to be released by McDonald's corporate headquarters tomorrow. Now, if any of you are interested in the fantastic real story of what happened, I'd be happy to tell you, but you play by my rules." All of the reporters had tight filing deadlines and didn't want to leave the scene without a story. They dropped their "true identity" inquisition and carefully listened to Ronald McDonald describe details of the near-fatal fiery crash.

As a hook for his story, Phil referred to a McDonald's national campaign for kids called "Make it Click," designed to encourage them to always use their seat belts. Stickers were given out at the restaurants with a specially developed "McDonald's Make it Click" logo encouraging kids to make their seatbelts click when they got into the car. Part of all the

Ronald's restaurant shows reminded kids to fasten their seatbelts and "Make it Click." Phil used this major national public relations initiative to explain his miraculous escape from injury in the helicopter crash.

With the TV cameras rolling videotape, radio reporters recording his every word and the newspaper scribes taking notes, this is what Ronald McDonald said: "Kids, you know your pal Ronald McDonald is always reminding you that when you get into your parents' car, the first thing you should do is carefully fasten your seatbelt and to make it click. And take it from Ronald, it's good advice. Now, earlier today when I got into my helicopter, the first thing I did with my seatbelt was to make it click. And am I ever glad that I did."

It was a McStroke of McGenius. After that unusual, off-beat and candid statement, the reporters couldn't have cared less who the man under the thick white pancake make-up was. The focus of their stories quickly changed, and Ronald had them eating out of his yellow-gloved hand. After that statement, the reporters had a new volley of questions, but now they were properly addressing the subject of their stories as Ronald. "Ronald, when did you first realize you were in trouble? Ronald, was that your first time in a helicopter? Ronald, what can you tell us about the pilot, is he OK?" Ronald stayed in character for the rest of the fifteen-minute session, dropping in three or four more mentions of "Make it Click" and keeping it all light and cheerful. The gist of the story that led every TV station's 6 p.m. newscast was, in a nutshell, that Ronald was OK, and he was OK because he wore his seatbelt, "Remember, kids, Make it Click."

Months later, at the Big Red Shoe Award presentation in Oak Brook, a video reel of how the story was covered nationally on NBC and CBS, along with two examples of local TV coverage, was shown to the group of Ronalds. The news clips were fantastic from a corporate public relations point of view. Each story was a total endorsement of the Golden Arches and the wonderful public service work they do in the area of child health and safety, with programs like "Make it Click."

When Phil got up to accept the award, he received a standing ovation from the room full of his fellow clowns. When he spoke, you could have heard a pin drop. There was no horsing around at all, just total admiration, respect and sincere gratitude from his Ronald brotherhood. He had upheld the Ronald Oath of secrecy, and done so with a clear head in the face of extremely unsettling circumstances. His quick thinking had also gained a great deal of positive press for the Ronald McDonald movement nationally.

Halfway through his acceptance speech, Phil began to break down and cry. He explained how in the '60s he had fought in Vietnam, and had a lot of experience in helicopters. That day in the sky just outside of Detroit, sitting in the small two-seater copter, he could see that the pilot didn't notice the power lines and they were headed for trouble, but before he could warn him, it was too late and the copter crashed into the parking lot, narrowly missing the large crowd that had gathered for the opening. Then he got all choked up with his admission that above all, in the midst of all the chaos, broken glass and billowing smoke, he knew he had to stay in character. Being Ronald came with an incredible responsibility to children all over the world. I looked around the room and saw many of the

Ronalds in the audience fighting to hold back their own tears. Phil closed by saying that adhering to the Ronald Oath was an honour, and it meant you had to perform consistently at all times, maintaining your cool under every imaginable circumstance. I thought to myself, "Yes, Phil, being a Ronald means that you have some pretty big shoes to fill. But then again, you have big shoes."

So the convention was everything I dreamed it would be, and more. Each night we had a wonderful group dinner (not McDonald's food). One evening we attended a special concert just for us with the singer-songwriter B.J. Thomas performing. I got to meet all the McDonald's marketing big-wigs and also got to know a swell bunch of Ronalds. I learned about new Ronald program management techniques and the latest local store marketing trends, and was inspired by tales of hamburger heroism from a guy like Phil. I was a fan of the McDonald's system before the convention. When I left, I was a true believer. I loved McDonald's. I had ketchup surging through my veins.

On the closing night of the convention, McDonald's organized a giant party. It was held in the large ballroom of the hotel we were all staying at and no expense was spared. A pop band played Top 40 covers, and there was a huge seafood buffet and three open bars located around the room. The party invitations had two dress codes specified: the advertising executives were to dress in business casual attire and the Ronalds were to come in full costume and make-up. Apparently it was a tradition to get a group shot of all the Ronalds assembled together at these conventions, and this closing party provided an opportunity for that shot to be taken by a professional photographer. Send in the clowns.

Later that night, after the group shot, I mingled around the giant ballroom soaking up the ambience and reflecting on the bizarre nature of exactly what it felt like to be in the middle of a sea of clowns. In the corner of the room was a professional photographer, the same one who had earlier taken the large Ronald group shot, with a portrait-style backdrop complete with expensive lighting gear. He was now taking portrait-style pictures of the Ronalds and their advertising agency managers. What a great idea, I thought. A portrait of me and my Ronald would make a great lasting memento of the fabulous three days I had spent at Hamburger University. The only problem was that in this large convention room, with 150 Ronalds in full costume and make-up, where was my Ronald? Even if I knew where to find him, it still would have been hard to locate him, because how was I supposed to recognize him? He looked identical to every other clown in the room. I suppose I could have just grabbed any old clown, and there were plenty to choose from. After all, what difference would it make? But I wanted a photograph with my Ronald.

I also must admit at this point that I had had a few rum-and-coke drinks and was bordering on being tipsy. Which just added to my anxiety. The photographer was shutting down his booth at 9 p.m. and it was now 8:50. I had ten minutes to screen 150 Ronalds and find mine.

So there I was, frantically bouncing from clown to clown, looking them in the eye and desperately trying to find my Ronald.

In the end, I never did find my Ronald on my own. After sorting through thirty or forty of them, one of the clowns said, "Oh, I know exactly who you are looking for," and he casually reunited me with my Ronald. Obviously the Ronalds were more adept at recognizing each other than I was. I guess it takes one to know one.

When we were finally united, my Ronald got a big kick out of my frenzied demeanour. He laughed loud and hard when I explained how long I had been trying to track him down that evening. He told me that he had seen me a few times throughout the party and was going to come over and say hi but got distracted. He told me I was easy to recognize.

We ended up getting our picture taken together just before the photographer shut down his booth.

The next morning we flew back to Vancouver together. To this day, over twenty years after the shot was taken, I have a beautiful colour portrait of me and my Ronald hanging in the entrance to my living room.

Oh, incidentally, you'll note that throughout this entire story I have not divulged the identify of my Ronald. I guess I took the Ronald Oath pretty seriously too.