

THE HARVEY MILK STORY

In May of 1978, I traveled to San Francisco to meet, spend a day with, and turn San Francisco Supervisor, Harvey Milk into a clown. If you are unfamiliar with Harvey Milk, he was elected in 1977 to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, thus becoming the first openly gay elected official in the history of California.

This trip was a planned public relations event for all the parties involved. The *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle* agreed to publish a full, five-page color photo layout. For Ringling Bros Circus, it was P.R. to help advertise the upcoming San Francisco Cow Palace week-long appearance of *"The Greatest Show on Earth"*. For Harvey Milk, a lover of the theatre, opera and the circus, it was the fulfillment of a childhood wish. One of Harvey's lifelong dreams was to be made up as a clown, complete with full make-up and costume by a real professional Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus clown.

He arrived early morning, tired and mentally pre-occupied, though determined to make this a great and memorable day. Initially, he looked depressed and emotionally drained; however, once we started and the cameras clicked, Harvey's energy level perked up. To lighten things a bit, I decided we should just sit and talk over coffee so I could find out about the inner Harvey. (I really didn't know who Harvey Milk was prior to this day.) During our "get to know you" time, I listened intently as he openly shared personal facts about his private life. While he was doing so, I closely observed his expressions and facial movements. We sat and talked for quite a long time before I actually started to create and work towards bringing out Harvey's inner clown persona. (During our conversational time, I think he drank six cups of coffee.)

Harvey told me about his upbringing in Woodmere, NY and about his family owned local store. I shared with him that my family also owned a little local store, (actually a mom & pop candy store) where I grew up in New Jersey; he and I immediately bonded. He spoke candidly about his love for the theater, his love of opera, and he confidentially shared that he had a recurring dream of becoming a clown and making an entire circus tent, filled with people, laugh at his antics.

He was articulate and outspoken, warm, charming and extremely humble - I instantly liked him. I felt we had become immediate friends, as if we had known each other all of our lives. He later told me his current mission was to instill “hope” into those that did not have hope, and to do his best to help spread love and laughter to as many people as possible. Harvey was raw with his feelings, open and direct. He was an inspiring man.

After our conversation, I asked Harvey to make various expressions for me, so I could see up close how his facial muscles moved. I directed him to pose and freeze-frame each of those facial expressions. He demonstrated happy, sad, confused, excited, frustrated, afraid, silly, pensive and proud. I remember his “proud” facial expression was the most commanding. There was a sincere honesty that exuded from his expressive wide-open eyes. I noticed that no matter how much he tried to smile, there was still a touch of sadness within him. I asked Harvey if he wanted to project a clown character filled with total sadness or one filled with total happiness. He sat back in his chair for a milli-second and then immediately responded: “Ron, I want EVERYONE to be happy! And I want to be happy as well!”

I then asked him to stand. I directed him to dig deep within his soul, as deep as he could go and exude total happiness throughout his entire body, especially expressing that feeling onto his face. I then directed him to freeze that look for me. He looked right back, into my eyes and said: “Ron, I want this so much. I’ve always wanted to make people happy and to just be able to be themselves, and I’ve always felt that I was a true clown at heart. It is such a privilege and honor to be a clown, even for a day.”

I proceeded to create Harvey’s very own personal clown make-up. My task was to bring out Harvey’s real inner clown from within his heart. I asked him to keep totally still.

I first added a base of white, giving him a clean and simple feel. I noticed Harvey’s mouth moved the most, so I exaggerated it, making it his largest feature. I added large black lines to accentuate his expressive eyebrows. I didn’t allow Harvey to see any of the make-up’s evolution until it was totally finished. Then, when I was 100% completely done, I handed Harvey the mirror and said: “Mr. Milk ... meet HARVEY THE CLOWN!”

He froze, totally fixated on his face. Then his eyes widened even more, and a huge clown smile filled his entire face. He seemed fascinated and mesmerized by his newfound outer persona. He never stopped smiling! He couldn’t stop studying the make-up, all the while making assorted rapid-fire facial expressions.

He said: “Oh Ron, I LOVE it. I am so happy!”

I put Harvey into a costume I had brought especially for him. Now, in full make-up and full clown costume, he jumped up, made a beeline to the exit, left the studio and actually departed the building onto the street. From that second-floor studio window I could see him in front of the building, skipping, jumping, singing and carrying a little pink flower in his hand. As he came in contact with a few people on the sidewalk, I could hear him introducing himself: “Hi, I’m Harvey Milk. I am a Supervisor. I am YOUR Supervisor. I run this city. I am an elected official and I am now a clown ... and I LOVE it!”

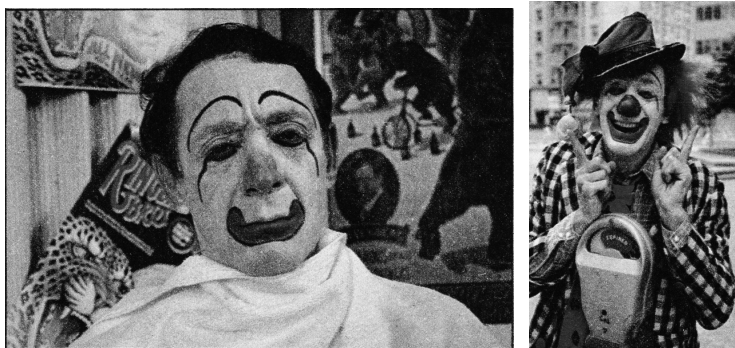
He jumped onto a passing cable car, rode it down the hill and went out of sight! I didn’t see “Harvey the Clown” again for hours. He finally returned and begged me to allow him to keep the costume and make-up on for the rest of the night. He promised he would return it all the next day. I informed him that we never allowed anyone to keep the costume on after the session, but for some strange reason, I said: ... “OF COURSE, HARVEY!” He said this was one of the happiest days of his life!

About 5:00am the next morning, my hotel phone rang, woke me up, and it was Harvey. “Ron, just like I promised you, I am returning the clown costume and I left it outside your hotel room door.” When I opened the door, the package was already waiting for me. It was wrapped in an elegant gift box with a huge, beautiful, sparkling white bow. Upon opening the package, I found that he had the costume dry-cleaned and then, neatly folded within a very exquisite and expensive tissue paper. It had a note...

“To Ron, my new-found friend and clown creator. I shall remember this day forever as one of the happiest days of my life.” ~ Your friend! Harvey

We kept in touch. I called him a couple of times. He would ALWAYS take my phone calls. Six-months later ... San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk, as well as San Francisco Mayor George Mascone, were both senselessly assassinated in their offices. I shook ... and I cried for days! Such a special soul ... and again, the good die young!

The day that “Harvey the Clown” and I had together was very surreal and now, so bittersweet! As these many years have passed, my heart shall always be warmed with the knowledge that I had helped Harvey Milk fulfill a childhood dream. I have cherished “Kodak Moments” in my memory bank, of “Harvey the Clown”, skipping down the street, filled with hope, jumping onto that cable car, descending down the hill, and disappearing into the distance of the streets of San Francisco, looking to do what he could to help make other people’s lives a little happier.



Photos by Daniel Nicoletta

