

A Random Twist Of Kindness Rewarded

Readers vote a man with a smile Newsmaker of the Year

By DONALD MILLER
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IT WAS MORE than a simple twist of fate. More than a random act of kindness.

I mean, there was Mr. Twister, alive and bounding through the cavernous avenues of the Big Apple, Manhattan! The costume of the Santa Cruz clown covering the excited soul of Cory McDonald, a rather shy young man from Capitola.

Twister/McDonald was in New York City a few weeks ago for an appearance on the Maury Povich talk show. His Santa Cruz attorney, Ben Rice, had gotten the show to spring for a four-day stay for Twister. Povich wanted to talk to the man who gained world-wide fame for feeding quarters into expired parking meters in downtown Santa Cruz.

And you know what they say: It's not really big news unless it's happening in NYC. Well, this was how far the Twister tale had spread.

"Are you the man from California?" the hardened and jaded Manhattanites would ask the clown.

"Yes I am," he'd reply proudly.

Yes, and traipsing through the city streets, by the CBS building on 57th Street, who does Twister run into but news anchor Dan Rather. Dan Rather!

And the very symbol of corporate news benediction remembered the clown, who had been featured one evening last fall on Rather's newscast.

"We exchanged pleasantries," McDonald says. But Twister is a kindly clown, and he noticed Rather was on a lunch break, so he traipsed on and let the great man finish his break in peace.

How appropriate then that Twister and his alter ego Cory McDonald, 26, (or is it the reverse? who empowers whom?) is the Sentinel's 1995 Newsmaker of the Year, chosen by a vote of readers and staff members.

Twister edged out local anti-tax activist Carolyn Busenhardt for the fourth annual award.

When told he was The Man, McDonald replied, "It's one heck of a Christmas gift."

It's been one heck of a year for Twister.

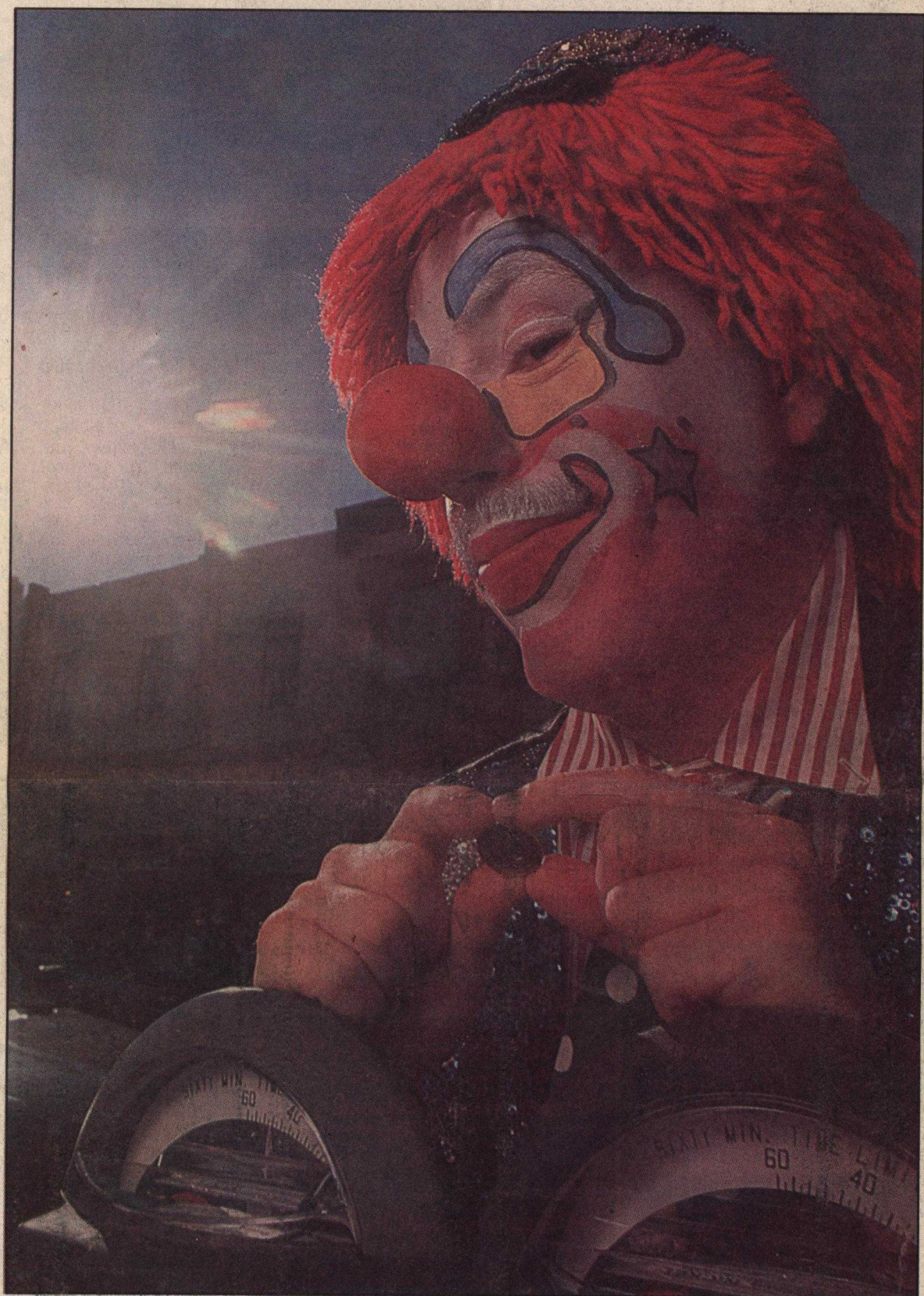
MCDONALD'S life story has been well chronicled. A kid with a learning disability with a talent for art. Hyperactive and dyslexic. Left Santa Cruz High to live with his father in Alaska. Back to Capitola in 1989, where he moved in with his mom and stepfather in a mobile home. Then, the revelation. He was a clown. A Pied Piper of kindness.

So he started out showing neighborhood kids balloon tricks. Later he did parties.

As Cory McDonald, he was forever helping out people, making marionettes, drawing. As Twister, he was going to downtown Santa Cruz and feeding parking meters.

Still a relative unknown. But then in September 1995 came the big break. The clown prince of parking was discovered.

Parking officers found out what he was doing and eventually police gave him a \$12 ticket for feeding "unauthorized" coins into the very citadel of a city's authority to collect money — its



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Cory McDonald can now feed the meters legally in downtown Santa Cruz. *Crime + Criminals 1990-1999 12-30-95*

The competition was close

MR. TWISTER, by the way, did not breeze to top-vote status. Local anti-tax activist, political candidate and haircutter Carolyn Busenhardt drew nearly 35 percent of the votes. To get an idea of her impact on the county, read Sentinel columnist Donald Miller's story on Local, Page A2.



Busenhardt

Past Newsmakers of the Year

■ **1992** Co-winners: an apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe on an oak tree at Pinto Lake park near Watsonville; and then-Congressman Leon Panetta

■ **1993** Assemblyman Bruce McPherson

■ **1994** Leon Panetta, by then chief of staff for President Bill Clinton.

THE STAR of television, radio and newspapers is sitting quietly in the living room of the Capitola mobile home he shares with his mom and stepdad, Charlotte and Jerry Bogle. The place is decorated to the max with Christmas stuff: figurines, wreaths, lights.

He's been a busy clown. While he still finds time to make a living doing balloon tricks for kids' birthday parties, and while he

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Mr. Twister

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still comes to downtown Santa Cruz at least once a week to feed quarters to the hungry meters, and while he makes sure he's outside Lyons restaurant on 41st Avenue every Tuesday night to do balloons for the families coming in to eat, he's still basking in the glow of his moment of media fame.

There was CNN's "Burden of Proof" legal-issues show, which Rice and McDonald taped last month in San Francisco. What a sight they were, late for the show, having to run through the streets of San Francisco. Rice in a business suit, Twister in full clown regalia. Honk, honk.

Last month he was in San Jose, hired, yes hired, by some downtown business owners to do his food-for-the-meters thing. The business owners were trying to persuade San Jose parking lords to give out courtesy notices instead of tickets. They gave \$100 worth of quarters to work with. Oh, the joy of that bag of coins.

And he's just back from San Diego, where he was hired to be the Official Media Celebrity helping get publicity for a sandwich shop. They were billing him as the "World's Most Famous

Clown." Cory liked the hype. "It gave me a sense of pride," he says.

And still the letters pour in. Some are just addressed to "Mr. Twister, Santa Cruz, California." The post office gets the letters to him.

Checks still come in. He pulls out a sack of uncashed checks. Twister says he only cashes them when he needs quarters for his meter habit.

His bumper stickers — "Mr. Twister: Feed my meter" — sold well, but those were for his legal defense fund. Twister's out of trouble now, but his mom says they're thinking of having some T-shirts made up to capitalize a little bit on the Twister craze.

And for '96? Twister says he'll keep feeding meters — a CNN reporter called him the "Johnny Appleseed of parking meters" — keep tying balloons. There's still one media giant to slay: the Tonight Show with Jay Leno. Boy, he wants to be invited onto that show. Sure, Johnny Carson was Twister's boyhood hero, but Johnny's gone. Now Twister would love to present Jay with his classic balloon Harley motorcycle.

But it's time to go. Balloons to tie, meters to feed.

Cory, Charlotte and Jerry give Rice, who has developed a friendship with the family as he accompanies Cory on some of his adventures, with a couple of presents: a wreath made by mom, and a fake severed hand and arm from Twister. "Ben, thanks for the hand when I needed it," reads an accompanying card. "Here's a high 5 for you."

WHAT WAS IT his mom said? "Look how far a quarter can take you."

Stepdad Jerry says the attention hasn't gone to Cory's head, that little kids are still his main thing. Parking meters "just happened."

But there was a moral to the meters, Jerry says. "We're most proud that one person can take on City Hall and one person can win. People say you can't fight City Hall, but you can if you have public support."

All the while, though, Cory the clown, Twister the shy kid, isn't looking for any fights, just wants to do his kindness act and would prefer what he does remains as random and anonymous as possible.

"Isn't that the idea?" says Twister. "If you wanted the recognition, why do it?"