

# **CWM Audio 71**

## **Dustin Portillo and Brandon Foster Interview**

### **August 8, 2017**

#### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Scott O'Donnell: Okay, good afternoon. It is August 8th, 2017, conducting an oral history with Dustin Portillo and Brandon Foster, two clowns. Two clowns, you'll hear more about their journey as clowns as we conduct. Scott O'Donnell doing the interview. Greetings to you both.

Dustin Portillo: Thanks for having us.

Brandon Foster: Thank you very much.

Scott O'Donnell: Oh, pleasure. Who would like to go first and tell us who you are, where you come from?

[00:00:30]

Brandon Foster: Dustin would love to go first.

Dustin Portillo: Alright, that's my representative. My name is Dustin Portillo and I was born in Kansas City, Kansas, grew up in Independence, Missouri.

Scott O'Donnell: Nice.

Dustin Portillo: Yes.

Scott O'Donnell: Not born into the circus, correct?

Dustin Portillo: Nope, first generation, probably first and last.

Scott O'Donnell: What? Where's your sense of adventure? Brandon, yourself?

Brandon Foster: Grew up and raised in Dallas, Texas, and first generation circus as well.

[00:01:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Awesome, so being first generation, at some point, there's probably an early circus memory in both of you.

Dustin Portillo: Yes, I actually went to Union Brothers Circus in Kansas City, Missouri. The show always played Kemper Arena the first or second week of September and I always used to go when I was a kid from about four years old. At that time, I told my parents at the age of four that I wanted to be a Ringling Clown and that's always something I wanted to do ever since I joined the show.

Scott O'Donnell: How was that received by your parents?

[00:01:30]

Dustin Portillo: I think they were like, "Oh, it's cute. He'll grow out of it." But they were very supportive, very supportive of everything and always took me every year to the show. We'll get the program and probably a VHS at that time, maybe a little light-up toy and then, it just progressed and progressed. We would go to other cities, Topeka, Kansas, which was about two hours away or St. Louis, Missouri, later on. I joined the show in 2005. In November of 2005, my parents drove me up to Chicago, Illinois, and my very first experience was at the Allstate Arena in Rosemont, Illinois.

[00:02:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Great, so I'm gonna dive back.

Dustin Portillo: Sure.

Scott O'Donnell: Move to Brandon, so you went to the circus. You enjoyed the clowns, I assume.

Dustin Portillo: Oh, yes. Absolutely, yeah.

Scott O'Donnell: You were drawn to the clowns.

Dustin Portillo: I was drawn to the clowns, nothing else.

Scott O'Donnell: Any particular clowns, any particular gag? What is it that set the spark in Dustin to go, "Wow, this is what I'm gonna do with my life."

[00:02:30]

Dustin Portillo: I just remember just the clowns really sticking out and two clowns in particular who I fell in love or were my idols growing up, Tom Perish, who is a pretty big legend in the Ringling World. He was on the show for about 18 years, Boss Clown for 17 of those 18 years, just a standout guy. If you know him personally, he's a really phenomenal person and Greg Desanto who is the Executive Director of the International Clown Hall of Fame here in Baraboo. Those two guys were just either the way that they looked or what they did, something stuck out in those two guys who were my idols growing up.

[00:03:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Great, Brandon?

Brandon Foster: Seeing my first show obviously, the clowns, when I was four years old, very much like Dustin.

Scott O'Donnell: That's the age, the four-year-old link.

Dustin Portillo: Right.

Brandon Foster: Probably as four years old, I can't say that there's a specific gag or clown that stuck out when I was that young. I just remembered that the clowns were hilarious and, to me, they were alive Looney Tunes Cartoon, which is what I loved. As I grew

[00:03:30]

- [00:04:00] older, all my friends were collecting baseball cards and I was collecting circus programs and memorizing clowns names in the program book based on their makeups, and their wigs, and all that stuff. My parents, not as supportive as Dustin, to say the least, they also thought it was a phase that I would grow out of. I actually, however, reached a deal with them that if I would go to regular college, they would pay for clown college; but the physical location of clown college closed in 1997 when I was in high school. I didn't think that I would be able to get on the road after that, I didn't know what my in was. I went to college and eventually after I graduated college, was unhappy and then, ran away and joined the circus later.
- [00:04:30] Scott O'Donnell: Right, so you mentioned that you, like so many, transitioned into Ringling at Rosemont.
- Brandon Foster: Yes.
- Scott O'Donnell: But before that, something must've happened. You must've had skillsets, you just don't show up at Rosemont, so how did you learn the finer arts of becoming a clown? Who saw you? How did you get a contract? What was that whole process?
- Dustin Portillo: Sure, going into my 13th birthday, my father was at a local clown and magic store.  
[00:05:00] It was called US Toys in Kansas City, Kansas, and there on the corkboard was a local clown's business card. There was four or five of them, so he snagged one and one of my birthday presents, there was juggling VHS tapes, and juggling balls, couple of other clown stuff, probably a wig, or a nose, or whatever and then, there was a business card. He had contacted this particular clown. I believe his name was Joey and his clown name was Joey.
- Scott O'Donnell: Creative.
- [00:05:30] Dustin Portillo: Very creative and he was actually handicapped clown. He was in a bad bike accident and left him with some brain damage, so he clowned with a walker and the guy was probably in his mid-30s or so. He took me under his wing and got me started in the local clown world and then, I was 15 years old. I went to a Ringling Show. It was called The Hometown Edition and Mitch Freddes who had transitioned from The Red Show over to The Hometown Edition, which is a small one-ring show. I met him during the pre-show and I said, "Hey, I want to get under Ringling. How do I do this?" He flipped through the back of the program and circled Tim Holst's name and said, "This is the guy who you need to contact to get onto Ringling." I had actually met Mitch probably about two or three years prior on the  
[00:06:00] 131st Edition of The Red Show. It was called The Bow and Bellow Tour and I actually drew up a little picture of him and gave it to him.
- [00:06:30] He remembered me from that experience in Kansas City, so he circled his name, gave me his email and said, "You need to contact him to get a job." He knew that I was really, super interested because of our prior experience and so, he circled it, gave it to me, saw the show, left. Every month after that, I would email Tim Holst. Every month, would email and say, "Hey, my name is Dustin Portillo. I want to be a  
[00:07:00]

- [00:07:30] clown in the Ringling Brothers Circus, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Well, at 16 years old, I got a phone call from Tim Holst and Tim Holst said, "Hi, this is Tim Holst, the Vice President of Talent and Production for Ringling Brothers Circus. I want to offer you a contract." I said, "I'm 16 years old, I can't join the circus." I don't know what his game was. The same thing happened at 17. I was actually in school and my brother called my cellphone and I was in the middle of communications class.
- My phone rang and I said, "I have to leave." Went out in the hall and he goes, "You need to get your butt home right now. Tim Holst just called the home phone and wants to offer you a contract."
- [00:08:00] Of course, I'm flipping out, so my brother came and picked me up early and it was already towards the end of school, anyways, picked me up.
- We went home. I called back Tim and he goes, "I forgot that you're still in high school." At 18, I was up at Six Flags up in New York and Queensbury, New York, working for Joe Barney, who's a big clown up in Northeast.
- [00:08:30] I was working for him and I checked my email one day out of the four or five months I was up there.
- I got an email from Tim Holst and the subject was, "Opportunity", and it was very short. I think it was one sentence and it said, "Dustin, can you please give me a call on Monday afternoon? I have a job for you on Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus."
- Of course, this was Tuesday, the day after, so I flipped out, thought that I had missed my opportunity, called him up and, "Oh, my gosh."
- [00:09:00] He goes, "No, we have an opportunity for you to join The Blue Show." I secretly wanted to be on The Red Show, not quite sure why.
- My heart was in The Red Show.
- Probably about a week later, signed some contracts. I signed three copies, I believe. At the time, you sign three copies and then, all three went back to him.
- [00:09:30] He had to sign them all and then, he sends you back one. One he kept and one went into their archives or whatever and I joined The Blue Show, or so I thought.
- About a month later after I left Queensbury and Six Flags and was back home in Kansas City and he called me up and said, "Hey, we want to switch you over to The Red Show."
- Yes, so he sent me the three copies back for The Red Show, signed them, and that meant that I had to be in Rosemont for rehearsals, not in Tampa, Florida, for which I originally thought for the 136th, which Mr. Scott O'Donnell was to be the Boss Clown with.
- [00:10:00]

I would've worked with him, but no. I was on The Red Show working with Kelly Oballa, who was the Boss Clown there and that's how my whole Ringling journey began was November 12th of 2005. I joined and I was on Ringling for exactly seven years because my last day on Ringling was November 12th, 2012.

I was with them exactly seven years.

Scott O'Donnell: Great.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah.

Scott O'Donnell: You had a lot of stories to tell. Brandon?

[00:10:30]

Brandon Foster: Yeah, so I was working as Assistant Store Manager at Kohl's Department Stores and loving every minute of it.

Scott O'Donnell: I would love Kohl's in Wisconsin.

Brandon Foster: Yes, no. I always wanted to be a Ringling Clown, like I said before, and the bug never left me and so, I sent an email to Pricilla Mooseburger, Trisha Manuel, who has a clowning company. She has a clown camp up in Minnesota, Mooseburger, and I got in contact with her and I wanted an original clown costume.

[00:11:00]

I was originally going to clown on the side because I had been working on my circus skills from a very young age, juggling, that sort of thing; but I wanted to at least start doing something on the side. I just decided to ask her, I said, "Hey, if I still wanted to join Ringling Brothers Circus, what should I do?" She said, "Well, I know two clowns who are currently on the road right now, Neil Sequoia, who was on The Blue Units, and Dustin Portillo, who was on The Red Unit.

[00:11:30]

She suggested that I reach out to them and talk to them about it and they would put me in contact with Tim Holst and tell me what I needed to do. I did that and as luck would have it, The Red Unit was on break, so Dustin responded first and he said that they had just fired two Hungarian girl clowns and that if I really was interested in, then I should immediately send in a video to Tim.

[00:12:00]

I put together a really terrible video, but not too terrible that I didn't get a response and Tim invited me to come out and do a live audition in San Antonio, Texas. I thought I was being really smart because I arrived there a day before my actual audition was supposed to take place. My audition was supposed to be, I think, on a Thursday and I came Wednesday, opening night, and I ran into Tim backstage.

[00:12:30]

My thought process was, "Well, I'm gonna show up a day early and then, Dustin and the other clowns graciously agreed to watch my audition and were gonna help me fine tune it before I actually did it." Well, I ran into Tim backstage and he said, "Brandon, why are you here a day early?"

I said, "Oh, I just wanted to get some tips and pointers, get a leg up." He goes, "Well, if you're already here, then you might as well come on the floor and audition tonight." He was like, "Wait a second."

[00:13:00] He looked at his watch, he's like, "Yeah, we have about 30 minutes until pre-show." He goes, "We'll just see you in the middle ring in pre-show in about 40 minutes." Of course, I'm freaking out, so I go backstage and I put on what I think is a great clown makeup and it wasn't great; but it wasn't terrible. One of the girl clowns, her name was Jessie, she would take me in. She said, "Before you go out on the floor, ask Kelly what he thinks about your makeup."

[00:13:30] I said, "Okay." I go over to Kelly who was the Boss Clown, I say, "Kelly, what do you think about my makeup?" He goes, "I think we need to do just a couple of tweaks and things like that." He leaned over to show it and goes, "Hey, grandpa. Come over here. We need to help him with his makeup." They start messing with my makeup and I ask if I could have a mirror to see what they were doing.

[00:14:00] They said, "No, don't worry about it. We don't have time for that, we need to get you out on the floor to audition." I never saw what my makeup actually looked like when I went out to audition, I went out, did my audition, came back to the alley and saw my face for the first time. It was triangles and just horrible, horrible, god-awful clown makeup and Kelly had videotaped my audition.

[00:14:30] By the time I left the alley to go wash my makeup off and come back, all the clowns were sitting around the entertainment unit having just watched my audition. When I came back, they all looked at me at the same time, got up and walked back to their trunks, sat down and did not say a word.

[00:15:00] I felt so small and then, I couldn't find Tim, I had no idea where Tim was, so I watched the show. I finally see him after the show, I go, "Tim, what do you think about my audition." He goes, "Brandon, I apologize. I completely forgot, I decided to have you audition a day early." He goes, "But the good news is, your appointment audition is tomorrow, anyways, so just come back tomorrow. We'll have you do it all over again." I did and then, I got a contract after that.

Scott O'Donnell: Nice, did your own makeup, no triangles and stuff like that?

Brandon Foster: Yes, no triangles or rainbows the second time around.

Scott O'Donnell: Very nice, and what did you learn by that experience?

Brandon Foster: Not to let other clowns do your makeup.

Scott O'Donnell: Hey, there we go. Wonderful, okay. Now, you're both on Ringling. You both achieved your contract. What was your first week or month like? What was your first impression of being on the road? You've watched it your whole life. Now, you're there.

[00:15:30]

Dustin Portillo: The crazy thing is whenever I was going to Six Flags, pre-Ringling, I took a Greyhound bus with my big, white Steamer trunk to Bridgeport, Connecticut. Joe Barney was gonna pick me up from the Greyhound station, take me to his house and then, we were to go up to Queensbury, about a couple hours away, I believe. It was a Sunday whenever I arrived in Bridgeport and we actually drove to Hartford to see The Ringling Show. Coincidentally, the one that I would join six months later; but my first week on the show, I got food poisoning from the pie car. It was beef quesadilla day.

[00:16:00]

Scott O'Donnell: For those listening that might not know what a pie car is, what is that?

[00:16:30]

Dustin Portillo: Yes, pie car. Pie car. Well, there's two of them. There's one on the circus train and it's basically the dining car, so all the performers, the staff, the crew, the horse, the horse trainer, everyone goes to the pie car if they don't feel like cooking or they're super lazy.

Brandon Foster: It's the restaurant.

Dustin Portillo: It's the restaurant car. Sometimes, they have really good food. Sometimes, they don't have the best food and then, when the show plays at the arena, they have a traveling pie car that goes.

Brandon Foster: It's a trailer, it's a wagon.

[00:17:00]

Dustin Portillo: Sets up backstage. It's a wagon and that's where everyone goes to get their meals during the show, so I got food poisoning from them. I had to perform the show and I was also puking in between cues and puking prior to going out. You just dab off and you go out there and you do it because I had just joined, so I didn't want to show that I was a sissy. I go up there, do your business, come back, puke, go back out. I did miss the finale, though. We were standing, all backstage, with our big pyrostats, which shoots out pyrotechnics at the end of the show. I hand it off to one of the clowns and I said, "I have to go." I left and did my business.

[00:17:30]

Scott O'Donnell: Shot off your own pyrotechnics.

Dustin Portillo: Shot off my own pyrotechnics, went back to the train and collapsed in my room. I was really sick. One of the clowns, one of the first amaze, knocked on my door, gave me some medicine and I basically laid on my floor for the entire night, woke up the next day early in the morning, crawled into bed. I think we had to perform in the morning or so, but it was really bad. But I pulled through and only got sick twice in seven years on Ringling, both was actually food poisoning. But it was an awesome experience.

[00:18:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Going back to your room on the train, what was that like?

Dustin Portillo: The train was an amazing experience. Everyone's first year, you're either in a coffin or a roomette. A coffin is basically enough room to walk in and go to your bed, a roomette is basically enough room to walk in, move a foot this way, move a foot this way and go to your bed. They're super small, compact, little rooms like what you probably find in New York City, little small apartments. We paid seven dollars a week to live on the train or 14. I can't remember if it was seven or 14. It was either a dollar a day or two dollars.

[00:18:30]

Brandon Foster: It went up every year.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah, it was either a dollar a day or two dollars a day to live on the train. Rent, you live rent-free, so even though you're making that much money, you can basically put it away. Although, I didn't; but living on the train was a really amazing experience because the train rocked you to sleep when it was moving. You really wanted to be at the beginning of the train because it had the less slack. The further you got, the more slack or play and you get bounced around, so you had to Velcro stuff down. You had to duck tape stuff down, you can't have breakable stuff; but it was an unbelievable experience. I wouldn't have traded that for anything.

[00:19:30]

Brandon Foster: My first week on the show was just pure excitement and pinching myself because I couldn't believe I actually made my childhood dream come true. I don't honestly remember what clown it was, but one of the clowns told me right before my first show, whatever I'm feeling right now, the excitement, the joy, the happiness of doing this, "Take that feeling, hold on to it, bury it in your heart and remember it because there will be days on the road where you are absolutely miserable.

[00:20:00]

You're upset at someone in the alley or something in your personal life is just not right and you don't feel like going out there and that's when you need to bring this feeling back out and remember it, so that you can do your job." I think, for a lot of people, their first show's their favorite show because everything is new. You appreciate it so much, so, for me, that first tour was my favorite because of that.

[00:20:30]

Everything was new, everything was amazing, although I would say the gags I was performing in later on were my favorite because I was actually doing more. I was more featured and had more responsibilities in the alley, but as far as just the feeling of doing your childhood dream, that was absolutely amazing. For me, the train was another aw factor because I never saw the train growing up. I always heard about it, I saw videos of it on television and I had no idea where they parked in Dallas.

[00:21:00]

I never saw the train, I was running to the train, so seeing that for the first time, really blew my mind. I didn't care how small it was, I was just so happy to be there and be on the train. It could've been even smaller and I would've been fine and it was the best sleep I'd ever gotten because that train rocks you back and forth. It's a baby crib, but for adults.

[00:21:30]

Dustin Portillo: Yeah.

Brandon Foster: The clickety-clacks just rocks you to sleep.

Scott O'Donnell: Nice, so you joined. Your first show was a new show. It was the middle point of a two-year show, right?

Brandon Foster: Yes, it was called the Bellow Mania Show. It was 135th Edition.

Scott O'Donnell: What's that like being a clown on Ringling when there was a featured clown?

[00:22:00]

Dustin Portillo: You don't have as many spots on the show. Clowning back in the early days, even up to the mid-90s, the clowns maybe had seven, eight, nine spots on the show. You would have a couple of ring gags, which happens in the ring. You have a couple of chases during the show, the Dentist Chase where it's a big mouth chasing a Dentist or a Nurse. You also had track gags, which faced towards one side of the audience and they're about two minutes. They always happened right after intermission and then, you had walk arounds, little instant side gags. You saw it. It was instantly funny and then, those as the Dave of the Reblaze and Bello Nocks happened, the clowns got pushed further and further on the back burner.

[00:22:30]

Brandon Foster: But we still had to do all the PR.

Dustin Portillo: But we still had to do all of our PR, so it was detrimental, I think, to overall morale of the clowns having a headliner clown because everybody wants to be featured. Everybody wants to feel like they are worth of that spot. I understand that from a financial standpoint that you need to have something to draw the people in, to bring them in.

[00:23:00]

Brandon Foster: Well, the show got shorter. Once they started inserting the pre-show, the show itself got shorter and as kids became more technologically-savvy and iPads and iPods took over, it felt like they were trimming down the show more and more. When they're building the show in Winter Quarters, obviously, the featured clown or featured performer because they're paying them the most money, they get their spots first. The acts get their spots and then, it's whatever's leftover will give to the clowns or if the working crew can't do a transition fast enough, they going to insert another clown spot. For Bellowbration, which was the next tour that we did.

[00:23:30]

[00:24:00]

Dustin Portillo: 2007 through 2008.

Brandon Foster: We were at Winter Quarters and they were working on transition from one act into the dog act and they were writing this speech about how a lot of the dogs were adopted from the pounds. The talking was going on and on and on.

Dustin Portillo: Well, it sounded like a two or three-minute spiel.

Brandon Foster: Kenneth was like, "Enough of this, just have the clowns do walk arounds between the flying act and the dog act." It was awesome because if we didn't have that spot,

[00:24:30] we would've literally only had one spot in the whole entire two-hour show.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah.

Scott O'Donnell: For our listeners that might not know, what's a walk around?

Brandon Foster: A walk around is like a one-line joke. It's a side gag.

Dustin Portillo: This is Dustin talking, so, for me, in that particular show, I had an Apple computer, so it was a big, green apple; but I would go to take a bite of it. It was fake. I would open it up and there was a computer inside, Apple computer, so around that time, Apple computers were getting bigger. They were getting more and more common, so anytime that a clown can do something that is relatable to the audience, it gives a better joke. Apple computers were big at that time. Dancing With the Stars had just come out, so the major clown gag in that show was Dancing With the Clowns, a parody of that. You had three judges and you had just a bunch of clowns coming in and doing little basic walk around type stuff. They would get either buzzed or advanced to the next level.

[00:25:00]

[00:25:30]

Scott O'Donnell: While you were on Ringling, did you have a character?

Dustin Portillo: I think everyone has their own character, but we don't have clown names, that's a big misconception.

Brandon Foster: Yeah, Dustin is also very ADD, so he changed his makeup every year on the show.

Dustin Portillo: Well, every other year.

Brandon Foster: Every other year, he changed his makeup. I try to keep my makeup pretty much the same and my character the same as the show progressed. My first year, I was new and I didn't know really what was going on; but after that, then I became a hillbilly clown. I had a missing tooth and I wore overalls because I'm from Texas and that was a big thing in my undergrad at Texas A&M University, was overalls. I had a target on my head. It was not a yarmulke. A lot of people thought it was, but it wasn't.

[00:26:00]

Dustin Portillo: You're not Jewish.

Brandon Foster: But it worked really good for the Jewish shows because everybody wanted a picture with the clown with the yarmulke. But yeah.

Dustin Portillo: But yeah, no one had clown names. There are a couple of clowns as Frosty Little.

[00:26:30]

Brandon Foster: Now, I did have a clown name, Chocolate Chip Pattie Pancakes, that was my official clown name.

Dustin Portillo: That's beside the point.

Brandon Foster: When we had local clowns that asked me what my clown name was, that was what I told them, Chocolate Chip Pattie Pancakes was my clown name.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah, but as far as clown clown names, nobody really had any, unless there was a nickname backstage. Frosty Little got his name Frosty whatever prior to the circus when he was in the army, so people had nicknames here and there; but as far as, "Hi, I'm Sprinkles the Clown." No.

[00:27:00]

Brandon Foster: Well, we also had first of May nicknames, too.

Dustin Portillo: We did.

Brandon Foster: Was the alley would give. Dustin's was Teapot because he would hold everything in for a long time and then, he'd explode in frustration and anger.

Dustin Portillo: Brandon's, I have no idea. What did they nickname you?

Brandon Foster: I don't think I have one.

Dustin Portillo: I don't think he had one.

Brandon Foster: I was an angel.

Dustin Portillo: Yes.

Scott O'Donnell: Walk me through that for a second, walk our guests through that. First of May, [00:27:30] what's that term mean and what's the parameters of being a first of May?

Dustin Portillo: First of May is someone who's a newbie to the circus because usually the shows went out around the first of May. All of the new performers were considered first of Mays, either a clown, a working man, a band man, or whatever; but the term really stuck with the clowns. Every year, you'd have first of Mays doing the show. My first year, I think there was five or six first of Mays, a couple of girl clowns.

[00:28:00] Actually, there was three new girl clowns. Wait a minute, more than that. There was four or five new girl clowns and two new guy clowns, so a first of May is someone who's new to the circus. Your whole first year, you're basically learning the aspects of the circus, how to live, how to work in the circus.

Brandon Foster: Typically, you don't have a lot of spots in the show. If you do, they're smaller spots in the show and you are setting all the props for all the senior clowns. They could be really particular about how their props were setup. Our first year, we were in-charge of setting up all the props for a pizza gag and one of the bits they had was a piece of cloth that was stretchable. It was pizza that would've snapped like rubber band, it was a side gag in the gag and I would get in trouble if I didn't have the correct number of folds in the pizza dough or one of the other clowns was upset if he didn't get two red foam bell peppers as opposed to one red foam bell pepper. [00:28:30] [00:29:00]

- Dustin Portillo: Yeah, so people are very particular about what they like. My first year, I was in the basketball routine. It was a clone gag/Windy City Acrobats. We were from Chicago. A bunch of Black late teens, early 20s kids who were phenomenal acrobats, the trampolines, playing basketball. It was the clowns versus them. I was a part of that and I was also a part of the pizza gag as well, I was the Oven Troll, so as they would throw props in, I would throw the props out. Voila, they had made the pizza, so it was a good responsibility.
- [00:29:30]
- Brandon Foster: I got to be the pizza, which was a giant German wheel, which is basically a giant hamster wheel. I looked like a pizza.
- Dustin Portillo: Yes, you did.
- Scott O'Donnell: Nice, let's talk a bit about life in Clown Alley. What's that like? What's the rules around Clown Alley? What's the structure of Clown Alley?
- [00:30:00]
- Dustin Portillo: Structure, you had Senior Clowns who had been there for probably two plus years. We always had a term called Senioritis or Secondyearitis and that was a clown who was going into their second year who thought they were big and bad. They'd been there for a long time and they were bullying the first of Mays, so we had a couple of clowns who were big egos; but structure, there was a lot of rules, pretty common sense rules. No smoking in costume. You can't bring people back in the alley without saying, "Knock, knock." Or you would get a pie or sock thrown in your face, that was just the rule.
- [00:30:30]
- Brandon Foster: No pattering in the alley.
- Dustin Portillo: No pattering in the alley.
- Brandon Foster: No juggling in the alley.
- Dustin Portillo: No juggling. Keep your trunk space clean.
- Brandon Foster: You're around these people 24/7, so normal people, they go to work and they go to their home and their home is not the same home as everybody they work with. The circus, it doesn't work that way, so the people you work with, all day for 12, 14 hours, and, "Oh, look. There they are at the train."
- Dustin Portillo: "Oh, look. There they are."
- [00:31:00]
- Brandon Foster: In fact, when we would go overland, which means not riding the train to the next city, sometimes, we'd try to go to a mall before the train would get in. All of a sudden, we'd see all these circus people at the mall wasting time.
- Dustin Portillo: Wasting time, for the train to get there.

Brandon Foster: Waiting for the train to come in that also went overland. You can never escape the people that you work with, so it was really important in Clown Alley that if you had a beef with somebody in Clown Alley, you're supposed to keep it in Clown Alley.

Dustin Portillo: Within the alley.

[00:31:30]

Brandon Foster: Not take it outside to the rest of the circus, that doesn't always happen. You have a lot of personalities. Clowns have very unique personalities and we had a lot of young kids, who some of which, joined the show when they were really young. It was their college years on the road, so it was a challenge sometimes of getting everyone to get along. I got along with a lot of people, but there were certain people that I just didn't care for like you do in any other job. But you make it work.

[00:32:00]

Dustin Portillo: You make it work, that's the most important thing.

Brandon Foster: Because you care about your job. You care about your profession and you care about the show.

Dustin Portillo: I don't want to call them rules because then, it becomes so regimen. It's like a military, but you layout guidelines to everyone and you say, "These are the guidelines. This is a professional environment." You hope that everyone plays professionally. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen and that's every job. You can go anywhere and people want to act differently, so you layout guidelines and you hope that everyone follows them. Some people don't, but you just make it work and you know that your job is to go out there and those people who had paid tickets to see you perform that evening, that's what they want to see. They don't care if your grandma died, they don't care if your dog passed away, they are there to see your show. You have to leave all of your emotions back in Clown Alley and go out there and perform, that is your job at that particular moment in time.

[00:32:30]

[00:33:00]

Brandon Foster: Another thing about the alley is it's not about any one person. When the Talent Scouts hire the alley, they try to hire a well-rounded alley, so you might have one clown who's better at juggling. You might have one clown who's better at slapstick, you might have one clown who's better at trampoline or a different circus field. As an alley, you want the whole alley to be strong together, not necessarily any one individual.

[00:33:30]

Scott O'Donnell: Within the alley, there is a person, male or female, typically, male, called the Boss Clown.

Dustin Portillo: Yes.

Scott O'Donnell: What's a Boss Clown? What's the role and one of you two lost a bet and got that

title?

Dustin Portillo: Yes.

Scott O'Donnell: Anointed with the title.

Dustin Portillo: Anointed, yes. The Boss Clown is someone who oversees Clown Alley. They're the liaison between management and clown, so if there's a problem with the clowns, their Production Manager, who is the one who watches the show day in and day out. They take the notes, they are the ones making calls or doing this and that during the show, they'll come to the Boss Clown and say, "Here are your notes from this particular show. It's your job to give them the information." A Boss Clown keeps the peace within the alley and oversees different jobs, makes sure that all the props are put away for load out, which is after the final show.

[00:34:00]

[00:34:30] All the props are all put away and we put them onto the train and go to the next city. The Boss Clown's job is also to hold rehearsals if something is getting sloppy during the show because every show, you want everything to be on point. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen because you run rampant from six packs to nine packs, that means three shows on Friday, three shows on Saturday, three shows on Sunday. You can get very tired, very fast, especially if you're a partier.

Scott O'Donnell: Particularly, with that fourth show.

Dustin Portillo: Exactly.

[00:35:00]

Scott O'Donnell: Which was three one-hour adventures, which adds up to a fourth show.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah, yeah. People don't realize that you're doing all these shows, but you're also doing all these PRs as well. I was blessed to be the Boss Clown from 2009 to 2012, I was offered the job a year prior; but I turned it down because I told Tim Holst that I don't think I'm ready to be the Boss Clown yet. I said, "Give me one more year."

[00:35:30] That would've been the end of 2007 going into 2008 and I loved it. I hated it because all of a sudden, your performance goes from you and shifts into watching everybody else. You lose some of the aspects of your performing.

Brandon Foster: Well, what you liked about being Boss Clown is that you were in control to a certain degree. You have the say of if people were not giving 100% of their performance, you could get your people and groom them to make sure that the whole alley was giving the best performance, which that aspect, you liked.

[00:36:00]

Dustin Portillo: Yeah.

Brandon Foster: You really liked being able to make sure that the alley was absolutely the best.

Dustin Portillo: Looked really good.

Brandon Foster: You liked that you had the ability to give your input in creation of new material and new stuff. What you did not like was reprimanding people and people who just want to do their own thing and didn't take their job as seriously as you did.

[00:36:30]

Dustin Portillo: Yeah, my biggest thing was, "Just come to the building, do your job for that four, five hours that you're there and go home." But some people, they just couldn't do that and so, that was very frustrating because I do the show. Remember, I just turned 19 years old. I never went out and partied, I never did anything, so I'm like, "You're 21 years old and you're on Ringling Brothers Circus. This is a big deal, this isn't just some small little mud show, this is a big deal, so take your job very seriously." But some people just couldn't do that and I could never understand why not.

[00:37:00]

Brandon Foster: You were also young, so it took you a while to get your feet wet and know how to best manage people.

Dustin Portillo: Yes, because reprimanding, say, Scott, to reprimanding Brandon, you have to be completely different and different tactics. You have to figure out if you can be a little bit more stern with somebody. Other persons may cry easily, so you had to really feel out and that took a while to know everyone's personality and know what you could say and what you couldn't say.

[00:37:30]

Brandon Foster: To get the best out of the performance because you were what? The third youngest Boss Clown.

Dustin Portillo: I don't know, I know Chuck Sidlow was the youngest, I think he was 17 or 18.

Brandon Foster: You were very young.

Dustin Portillo: I just turned 21, I think, whenever I became Boss Clown.

Brandon Foster: You were managing.

Dustin Portillo: People in their 40s.

Brandon Foster: People in their 40s.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah, so it was, "This little punk." It was a lot, it was a lot to figure out; but I enjoyed it.

Scott O'Donnell: Excellent, favorite memories?

[00:38:00]

Dustin Portillo: Favorite memories, probably seeing my parents come and see us perform, meeting Brandon. I would've never met him unless it was the circus and we've been together now for 11 years.

- Brandon Foster: Yes.
- Scott O'Donnell: Good answer, that you both agree on a date and support.
- Dustin Portillo: That's 11 years, so those are some pretty awesome memories, playing Kansas City, Kemper Arena, which was yeah, that was my very first year. The show doesn't play there at all now, doesn't play anywhere at all now; but my first and last time playing Kemper Arena with the circus, just being able to do what I wanted to do whenever I was a kid, not a lot of people can say that their childhood dream is what they grew up to do in life. I was very blessed in that, I think both of us are very blessed in that regard that we grew up wanting to do this. We did it. I would like to think that we were successful on Ringling and that's probably my most favorite memories is just being able to live out a childhood dream.
- [00:38:30]
- [00:39:00]
- Brandon Foster: Me, my memories are just the ability to watch certain acts every day, so the last four that I did, we had fully-charged. We had the Human Fuse, which was Brian Miser and he would get lit on fire and shot from a crossbow and just going to work every day and getting to see that is pretty awesome and special, seeing elephants and tigers every day, going into work and knowing that you could, every time you wanted to, talk to the animal handlers or vet staff and ask them questions about the animals. Some of the PRs were really amazing. We opened the Nasdaq.
- [00:39:30]
- Dustin Portillo: Yeah. No, we closed the Nasdaq.
- Brandon Foster: Closed the Nasdaq Stock Exchange, that was pretty amazing.
- Dustin Portillo: The Nude Sock.
- Brandon Foster: We did a shoe shine in Grand Central Station, which was really, really fun.
- [00:40:00]
- Dustin Portillo: Numerous television shows.
- Brandon Foster: Television shows. Larry, The Cable Guy.
- Dustin Portillo: Newspapers.
- Brandon Foster: Had a television show called, "Only in America", and he did a shoot with us at Clown Alley for Zing, Zing, Zoom in 2010.
- Scott O'Donnell: Particularly, he liked the hillbilly clown.
- Brandon Foster: He liked the hillbilly clown.
- Dustin Portillo: He liked Brandon's character.
- Brandon Foster: That was special, things like that. Those memories are really great.

[00:40:30]

Dustin Portillo: Being featured in magazines, and newspapers, and TV, any aspect of social media, or any type of media. We were going on radio.

Brandon Foster: I also say the great thing about the circus is relationships I build with both performers on the show and fans. There was a young kid who came out to see the show in Chicago and my grandmother had just died and he apparently had done his makeup and had a target on his head like I did. I wasn't there because my grandmother passed away and everyone was like, "Oh, this could who showed up to the show, you should've seen him. He was dressed just like you." I was really bombed because I never had any kid, I've done that before.

[00:41:00]

Dustin Portillo: Take a liking to your clown character.

Brandon Foster: In my character like that before, so luckily they came back and he was wearing a target again. They became really, really good friends. His name is Pierce and his mom's name is Kim and things like that is really special, too.

[00:41:30]

Dustin Portillo: Yeah, people who you meet across the country, they play a vital role in your life. You may not see me every day, you may not talk to me every day; but they're persistent in your life. You make long-time friends. We have friends from all over the world, Russia, Paraguay, Mexico, Italy, France, Spain, Brazil. I would've never thought a million years that I would've had the experience of knowing people from almost every single country in the entire world.

[00:42:00]

Brandon Foster: The other thing that people don't tell you. I just lost my train of thought, I don't know what I was gonna say.

Dustin Portillo: Next.

Scott O'Donnell: Next, cut the hook. Circus called to you. You talked a bit about it. How is it different, better, more frustrating than normal life?

Dustin Portillo: Circus culture, I'm glad I left whenever I did because you get stuck and by getting stuck, it means that it becomes so comfortable living on the train, doing what you do. You know every Friday, you're gonna get a paycheck, you know that every week, you are guaranteed to play this city, not really guaranteed; but that, "This is the route. We're going to go here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here." It's planned out for an entire year. Some people sign one-year contracts, some people sign two-year contracts, so you know that you're somewhat guaranteed that that year, you don't have to pay rent. You just have to buy your groceries, so you get very comfortable living in that lifestyle.

[00:42:30]

[00:43:00]

Brandon Foster: Right, but it's a different lifestyle, so the things that people in the city take for

granted, they know where the doctor's office is gonna be. They know where the grocery store is.

Dustin Portillo: Where the laundry mats is.

Brandon Foster: They know if they're gonna mail a package, where to go. For us, that was some of the biggest challenges every week, "Okay, where am I getting my groceries this week? If I have to go to the doctor, where am I gonna go?" That was one thing. We had really great health insurance on the road, but if you got injured, you were seeing a new doctor every week.

Dustin Portillo: Every week.

[00:43:30]

Brandon Foster: That became very frustrating because every doctor didn't want to trust what the previous doctor's diagnosis was.

Dustin Portillo: A lot of people would go home if they lived in The States. It's more difficult if you're living in Brazil and you're traveling in Texas, so if you're from The States, which only most of the clowns are the only act, "people", I say that in quotes, who were from The States, they would go home to get rehabbed or whatever.

Brandon Foster: Treatments, so they can see the same doctor.

[00:44:00]

Dustin Portillo: But we base off a city if there's a grocery store close to the train, if the building's good, if the crowds are always great.

Brandon Foster: Right, but the more stuff there is to do around the train or around the arena, then the better to be your life is.

Dustin Portillo: The better that city is. If it's a four-mile trek to a grocery story, you don't really take a liking to that city because you know.

Scott O'Donnell: What was a good city?

Dustin Portillo: Orlando, a lot of the bigger cities. Oh, my gosh.

[00:44:30]

Brandon Foster: Well, my favorite cities were always the cities that had the most things to do on days off, so I really liked New York. New York was great because you could always get any place on the train or public transportation.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah, the subway.

Brandon Foster: I enjoyed Phoenix, Arizona, because they had Cooperstown.

Dustin Portillo: Cooperstown.

Brandon Foster: Which was right by the back door of the arena, so we had a really good restaurant to go and eat and get a big unit, which is a giant hotdog where they ring a bell. They yell, "Big unit."

Dustin Portillo: Big unit.

Brandon Foster: Huge Dr. Peppers because I'm from Texas. I like Dr. Pepper.

Dustin Portillo: Oh, Texas.

[00:45:00]

Brandon Foster: Houston was a great city in Texas because they had Taco Cabana 24/7 chips and quezo and Dr. Pepper.

Dustin Portillo: All around we had building.

Brandon Foster: Yeah.

Scott O'Donnell: That's an order, not a memory.

Brandon Foster: Yes, but I also loved Anaheim because Anaheim had Disneyland. But there was a lot of stuff around the building there. Colorado Springs, we always went water rafting with the circus.

Dustin Portillo: Oh, Colorado Springs is just beautiful.

Brandon Foster: It was beautiful.

Dustin Portillo: Amazing.

Brandon Foster: Those were the cities that I liked.

Dustin Portillo: Vegas, of course. You can't forget Las Vegas.

[00:45:30]

Brandon Foster: Did not like Ohio, did not like Ohio.

Dustin Portillo: No ohio.

Brandon Foster: The roads were terrible because of the weather there, the weather was usually bad.

Dustin Portillo: It's always very gloomy there. When a show played there, it was usually in September, October. It was always gloomy or it would play in February or March, it was just gloomy, snowy, rainy, muddy, not a big fan of Ohio. I apologize if you're listening and you're from Ohio, I actually have family there who was born and raised; but not a fan of Ohio. But just cities that the attendance was good, the

[00:46:00]

people were good. You knew that you were making an impact in their lives.

Brandon Foster: The thing about the cities were you could tell what city you were in based on how the people acted. In New York, the people were a lot more pushy for autographs, "Clown, sign my autograph book. I'm paying your salary. Clown, this. Clown, that. Get over here clown."

Dustin Portillo: Yeah.

Brandon Foster: That kind of thing. I won't say that they're rude. It's just their personality.

Dustin Portillo: They're New Yorkers.

[00:46:30]

Brandon Foster: In LA, everybody's on an LA time, so everybody was late, so it would be empty when the show starts. 15 minutes in, it's full or filled and you're like, "Where did all these people come from?"

Dustin Portillo: Tennessee, people are very polite, "Can we make a picture?"

Brandon Foster: Same thing in Texas.

Dustin Portillo: "Oh. Well, we can't make a picture; but we'll take one."

Brandon Foster: "Excuse me, Mr. Clown. Can I get a picture with you?" Was Virginia, not everyone there has the best hygiene. I remember Dustin.

[00:47:00]

Dustin Portillo: Okay, we are in a whole demographic now, Brandon.

Brandon Foster: I know, but Dustin was doing a clown gag.

Dustin Portillo: I was doing a clown shoe gag, so you take someone's.

Brandon Foster: It was a magic gag, a shoe gag.

Dustin Portillo: You have a person sit down and you stand in front of them and you take whatever object to a piece of toilet paper. You go back and forth across their face, you can see a photo over their head. Well, I took off someone's shoe and a small beetle crawled out of his shoe.

Brandon Foster: It wasn't small.

Dustin Portillo: I handed it.

Brandon Foster: It was the size of a quarter.

[00:47:30]

Dustin Portillo: I handed it back to him and I said, "Okay, thank you." We put the person back in their seat.

Brandon Foster: They didn't even use the person in the gag.

Dustin Portillo: Didn't even use him.

Brandon Foster: After the beetle crawled out of the shoe, they were done with her.

Dustin Portillo: Again, what we base a city off of, somebody else, a townie or somebody who's from that town would base it up from a completely different side. If there's something close that we could eat, we could get groceries, there's fun stuff to do.

Brandon Foster: For me, it was more about restaurants than it was about grocery stores.

[00:48:00]

Dustin Portillo: #justsaying.

Brandon Foster: Movie theaters.

Dustin Portillo: Movie theaters.

Scott O'Donnell: You had a great journey. At some point, you made a decision to leave?

Dustin Portillo: Yes, the decision to leave.

Brandon Foster: You left because I left. I don't think you would've left unless I left, I'm just #justsaying.

Dustin Portillo: Well, okay. Let's just backup a little bit, so Brandon left the show in 2007.

Brandon Foster: Oh, you're getting personal.

[00:48:30]

Dustin Portillo: No, it's okay. Are you sure? Left the show in 2007 for personal reasons.

Brandon Foster: I don't know. If you're gonna say it, you gotta say it right. I was outed, I was not out to my family, I was not out to anybody; but people on the show and they were doing an article for LGBT major publication in LA. My uncle lived in LA.

Dustin Portillo: It's called, In Magazine.

Brandon Foster: Who read that magazine.

Dustin Portillo: Brandon has a gay uncle who lived in LA.

Brandon Foster: Let me tell the story.

[00:49:00]

Dustin Portillo: His relationship with his sister, who was Brandon's mother, is not the best. Your turn, tag. You're it.

Brandon Foster: Right, so Dustin was doing this interview and he asked me. He said, "Can I do this interview for this gay publication?" I said, "Yes, but just don't tell them who your boyfriend is." He said, "No problem." Well, we had another clown in the alley who we loved, and admired, and respected. His name was Alan Ware, his clown character was a grandpa, he was also gay, so he was also doing the interview.

Dustin Portillo: At different times.

[00:49:30]

Brandon Foster: Well, Alan did not know that I was not out yet, so the same interviewer asked him point blank, "Oh, by the way, I forgot to ask Dustin who his boyfriend was." Alan was like, "Oh, it's Brandon Foster." He listed me as his boyfriend, so the day comes where the publication is printed and everything. Dustin's all excited because it's one of his first major LGBT publications. He comes in the alley all excited, he starts reading it to me and he just stops.

[00:50:00]

Dustin Portillo: This is a Saturday morning in the alley, probably, around 7:00 in the morning.

Brandon Foster: He just stops reading it.

Dustin Portillo: I go.

Brandon Foster: I go, "Why aren't you reading it?"

Dustin Portillo: He knew, he knew exactly what happened.

Brandon Foster: I grabbed it from him, I saw my name, I marched right up to the Show Promoter's office and I ranted and raved and cussed up a storm, "How dare you do this?"

[00:50:30] Freaked out because I was afraid my uncle would read it and out me to my mother. He ended up not reading it, but it was enough for me to freak out and I left the show.

Dustin Portillo: Yup, and then, we had contract talks in Corpus Christi and I said, "I would love to come back next year, but if you could please hire Brandon back." Scott O'Donnell was the one who said, "Yes, that wasn't even a problem."

Brandon Foster: I just threw all my personal problems out and came back on the road and then, I stayed for another almost six years.

Dustin Portillo: Yup.

[00:51:00]

Brandon Foster: But why I left was because I loved it so much, I was afraid I would never leave if I didn't leave when I did.

Dustin Portillo: You get stuck. Yeah.

Brandon Foster: I was 29 and I said, "I don't want to be here when I'm 30." That was it. I was like, "When I'm 30, I don't want to be here because I'm afraid I will get stuck here and I'll never leave." I left and I went to go do film school and went I left, Dustin was like, "Why am I staying here? I should leave and go do something, too."

[00:51:30]

Dustin Portillo: Yeah, so I actually called a meeting. I actually emailed Nicole Feld and I was like, "Listen." Because at this time, I was already Boss Clown, "Listen, I'd like to have a meeting with you when you're in Fairfax, Virginia." I was just on the outskirts of Washington, DC, "I've gotta meet with you to discuss if I want to come back for next year's show." Her and I talked in between shows for probably 40 minutes or so and it came down to, "Listen, if you want to stay, we would love to have you back; but if you don't want to stay, it's up to you." I left.

Brandon Foster: The issue also was Dustin's last year, he wasn't just Boss Clown. One of the headlining clowns got injured, so he's understudy for that, so he's filling in that for all year. He was getting Boss Clown pay, plus some pay for that, then the juggler got hurt, so then he was in the juggling act, too. He was get some pay for that, so he's making a really nice paycheck and when he talked to Nicole, he was like, "I want to do more in the show."

Dustin Portillo: Yeah, what's gonna be an incentive for me to stay?

[00:52:30]

Brandon Foster: Obviously, he wasn't gonna be the headliner. He wasn't gonna be in the juggling act because those were unique situations and she couldn't promise that there would be something there.

Dustin Portillo: That there would be something good for me to stay.

Brandon Foster: I left, so he left.

Dustin Portillo: I said, "I'll leave." Because every year that you're on the show, you want to grow as a performer and get better and better. If something doesn't heighten your level or your skill level, there's no point of staying. You might as well leave and go do something different, so that's what I did. I chose to leave on a high note.

[00:53:00]

Scott O'Donnell: What was that transition like? Suddenly, now, you're not on the road with the circus.

Dustin Portillo: Oh, boy. Well, I was making quite a bit of money in my last year on the show and I went from a substantial amount of money to 800 bucks every two weeks.

Brandon Foster: Working at Chipotle.

Dustin Portillo: Working at Chipotle, so you see a lot of the old-time Ringling clowns, Paul Jerome. A lot of those guys fall into financial circumstances, a lot of them ended up in Florida.

[00:53:30]

Brandon Foster: A lot of the old clowns ended up dying without any money.

Dustin Portillo: Any money, homeless shelters. They live with somebody and that's very unfortunate because in the circus world, they're everything. Out in the real world, they're just like everybody else.

Brandon Foster: Even now, circus performers that leave circuses, if they can't find another job.

Dustin Portillo: They do a real job.

Brandon Foster: They age out of their abilities.

Dustin Portillo: They go in the real world and work at Walmart.

Brandon Foster: They are down on their luck like that, so it's very scary. Me, I went to film school and I got a student loan, so I was fine money because I was borrowing money.

[00:54:00]

Now, I'm paying it back; but that's beside the point.

Dustin Portillo: But being a circus clown is very specific. It isn't like, "Oh, I am a Financial Adviser. I can go anywhere I want, I can work with any company." With a clown, and specifically Ringling, if that's the only thing that you ever wanted to do and now, you're in the real world.

Brandon Foster: It's hard.

Dustin Portillo: It's like, "Jeez, what do I do now?" I can understand why a lot of those guys back then fell into financial debt and were homeless and died with nothing. Brandon and I said, "We don't ever want to end up like that." I had heard stories of Paul Jerome, one of my favorite older Ringling clowns, was begging for money in Madison Square Gardens when the show played there and that's not what I wanted to do. We left and I moved out to LA, was in the commercial, tried to do commercial work for television, got on a couple.

[00:55:00]

It's called being a bail for commercials, that was me. Sorry, and so I never made it into commercials. It's a very cutthroat industry out there as you know and Brandon was in Florida, at film school. I was in LA. He graduated, moved out to LA. I moved to Florida and got a job doing promotions and that sort of stuff for McDonald's, working with the Ronald McDonald Program in Tampa.

[00:55:30]

I had an assistant, I had to let him go and then, Brandon was just ending film school and was out in LA and was done. He came out there to work with me, he still writes, he's doing his own ad agency business, doing vacation planning for Disney.

We're happy out in Tampa, we have a house we built last year.

Brandon Foster: You make it sound like I'm a scatterbrain.

[00:56:00]

Dustin Portillo: You are and everything is good. Everything's perfect.

Brandon Foster: Well, I wouldn't say everything is perfect; but we are very blessed.

Dustin Portillo: We're very blessed, we're very blessed with how we ended up, so we don't know what the future holds for us obviously; but we're just counting our blessings as we speak.

Scott O'Donnell: Here, we said, after 146 years, the brand that we all fell in love with, joined, and worked passionately for ceased operations. Who knows if it'll kick in again? Those that are listening, what would you tell them about Ringling? What would your takeaway be from Ringling?

[00:56:30]

Dustin Portillo: It was an amazing.

Scott O'Donnell: How was it? What did they miss?

Dustin Portillo: Oh, my gosh. You have to go back and going through the archives here at Circus World is just incredible, all of the artifacts.

Brandon Foster: No, tell them what they missed.

Dustin Portillo: Well, I am. You have all of these.

Brandon Foster: Elephants, you missed elephants, lots of elephants.

Dustin Portillo: Go to YouTube.

[00:57:00]

Brandon Foster: Lots of razzle dazzle and sparkling costumes.

Dustin Portillo: It was just an amazing experience.

Brandon Foster: It was a show like no other.

Dustin Portillo: That nobody will ever, ever see again.

Brandon Foster: But I will say that growing up and watching the show had changed from when I joined the show, so when I joined it, when I saw the show growing up, they always had walk arounds. They always had track gags. There was 20 elephants. The clowns could make their own pyro. When I joined the show, we couldn't make our own pyro.

[00:57:30]

Dustin Portillo: Although I did have squibs in the bottom of my trunk for a couple years.

Brandon Foster: The show changed drastically as time went on, so even for the kids that want to join the show, and the show shut down, it wasn't the same as when I saw it.

Dustin Portillo: It was phenomenal and there's no other experience like it in the entire world and there never will be.

Brandon Foster: Everything is live. There's no tricks.

[00:58:00]

Dustin Portillo: Working with all the people and the smell of the concessions mixed with the smell of the animals. You walk into the building. It just hits you.

Brandon Foster: Yeah, you walk into the building and it smells like circus.

Dustin Portillo: It just hits you on the face.

Brandon Foster: You know the circus is in town as soon as you walk in the building. I remember that from my childhood.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah.

Brandon Foster: Even when we were on the show and you have a week off and you go home for a week and you come back and that smell hits you all over again. It's pretty crazy.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah, there was nothing like it in the entire world, walking into the arena as a kid seeing it. Hundreds of performers, colorful, amazing, go to Circus World. You're gonna see everything. I've gotten chills and I've gotten a lot of deja vu since I've been here. It's phenomenal, nothing ever like it, nothing will ever be like it. It's just very unfortunate that the show closed. It's very unfortunate.

[00:58:30]

Brandon Foster: A big part of that is misinformation.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah.

Brandon Foster: Misinformation, people not doing enough to get the truth out there.

[00:59:00]

Dustin Portillo: Yeah, people not doing research on it, so it's very unfortunate.

Scott O'Donnell: Talk a little bit more about that. What do you mean by that?

Brandon Foster: When I was on the show, there was always PETA protesters, animal protesters saying that we'd hurt the elephants. For the almost six odd years I was on the show, I never once saw any mistreatment of any kind.

Dustin Portillo: No.

[00:59:30]

Brandon Foster: They were treated the best, better than any of the animal performers. My biggest frustration the whole entire time I was on the show, I never felt like our company Feld Entertainment was doing enough to counter all the misinformation that was being spread about us to people.

Dustin Portillo: To combat all of that misinformation.

Brandon Foster: Defensive, they were always on the defensive, instead of offensive and there was a 10-year court battle where a bunch of the ASPCA, PETA, Circus Ringling Brothers for mistreatment of the elephants. They lost and were being counter sued for racketeering charges because one of their main witnesses was paid and discovered. They ended up paying the Ringling Brothers millions and millions of dollars.

Dustin Portillo: That never hit the news.

Brandon Foster: Hit the news barely. It was a blip, but Feld never really pushed it either. I didn't understand why they didn't make a bigger deal out of it, I think they thought it would just go away. It never went away and I know that the PETA protesters and the animal protesters, when we were doing animal walks, they treated us terribly.

Dustin Portillo: Oh, yeah.

Brandon Foster: They called us every name in the book, they told our dancers that they were raped by their father.

Dustin Portillo: Death threats.

Brandon Foster: They told them. We had an African-American clown. They said he should get hung by a tree and just horrible.

Dustin Portillo: Oh, they were death threats, "We're gonna kill you."

Brandon Foster: Horrible, horrible things.

[01:01:00]

Dustin Portillo: They're horrible people. People who are, "We don't have enough information." They're just given some money and say, "Here, hold this sign up there."

Brandon Foster: We were doing load out in Anaheim and some of the protestors had bullhorns and they were using them. Our animal handlers told them, "You're scaring the elephants. Please stop."

Dustin Portillo: Because they're being super loud.

Brandon Foster: Super loud, using the siren on the bullhorn, everything else. They refused to listen to our animal handlers and because of that, one of the elephants got scared, took a

misstep and fell off the ramp.

Dustin Portillo: Going into the stock car.

[01:01:30]

Brandon Foster: Of course, the protestors took pictures of the elephant and then, tried to use that as, "Oh, look what Ringling did." When they were the ones who actually caused it.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah.

Brandon Foster: That stuff was extremely, extremely frustrating and as a clown, your hands are completely tied. No one's gonna listen to a clown and I will say that as much as I love the circus, that was one frustration for me. This was the way that sometimes other performers or even people in corporate treated us was, "Oh, you're a clown, so obviously you're not very smart or you're not educated because what else could you do with your life if you're a circus clown?"

[01:02:00]

Dustin Portillo: But there's some truth to that. I'm sure.

Brandon Foster: For me, I had my undergraduate degree and then, I left and went to graduate school, so that always really irritated me. The people that I really admired and respected the most all my time in the circus were people in corporate, people in higher up positions who treated clowns with the respect that we deserve because we really were some of the hardest working people in the show business because we didn't just do our clown acts. We did the bulk of the PR.

[01:02:30]

Dustin Portillo: Unloaded, load out.

Brandon Foster: Loaded, load out, everything.

Dustin Portillo: Yeah.

Brandon Foster: For little pay.

Scott O'Donnell: Very meager price point.

Brandon Foster: Yes.

Dustin Portillo: Yes.

Brandon Foster: Which, I will say one thing about price point, they decided that the first-year clown were not making enough money. They decided to keep bumping up the first-year clown pay and I thought I was getting a really good raise every year. Tim was just bumping me up to what the first-year clowns are making every year and then, I found out about that.

[01:03:00]

Dustin Portillo: Cha-ching.

Scott O'Donnell: Nice, anything further that you'd like to say? It's your legacy, it's your time.

[01:03:30]

Dustin Portillo: My legacy, I just hope that people look at the old videos, go to YouTube, come to Circus World. Go to International Clown Hall of Fame, go to the Ringling Museum and see. If you're not born yet or if you weren't born in the eras of Ringling, just really quite phenomenal. Nothing will ever be like it, see an elephant up close, seeing someone spin by their teeth. You see it in other circuses, but there was just something different about the Ringling experience. You'll never see it again.

[01:04:00]

Brandon Foster: Personally, I hope circus goes through a rebirth to whatever is contemporary and works for some of today's audience with some of the traditional aspects of the old circus with the new, that's my personal thing. I would like to say something that I always say because people always ask me, "What is your job like as a circus clown?" I always tell people the same answer for the however many years I was on the show and that was, "I get paid every day to slap my boss and drop my pants at work."

[01:04:30]

Dustin Portillo: That's true and my favorite quote is, "You're only as good as your last performance."

Brandon Foster: Hopefully, your last performance was really good.

Dustin Portillo: I don't think so.

Scott O'Donnell: Great, thank you, gents.

Dustin Portillo: Thank you.