

*~ Dom DeLouise ~*

*In memory of a man who taught me how to 'pay-it-forward'...*

I was shocked when I heard about the death of actor-comedian, Dom DeLouise, who died in his sleep Tuesday, May 5<sup>th</sup> at the age of 75. I first met Dom on the CBS set of "The Dean Martin Variety Hour" when I was just 17 years of age. He was a cameraman at the time and I was a 'new-pledge', that is, a quick replacement for one of the original "Dean Martin Golddiggers" who had taken maternity leave. Often times there were hours of non-activity on the set due to dressing the stage, setting the lights, blocking Dean's entrances and the rewriting of scripts. The dancers would gather outside for 'a smoke' or retreat into the dressing room to play cards until called back to film. Since I was much younger than the other dancers and didn't seem to 'fit in', I chose to remain 'in the house'. I was mesmerized by the multitude of stagehands and behind-the-scenes people who made the show's finished product seem so effortless. I remember most vividly the day Dom DeLouise befriended me...

My mother had dropped me off at CBS and was expected to pick me up nine hours later after completing the filming of two episodes. When the director announced that we would have to stay an extra two hours due to lighting problems, I found myself whining, "Oh no....my mom will be outside waiting for me the whole time!" "Your...Mom?" Dom echoed. "She drove you here? How old are you, Cutie?" I responded that I had just turned 17 and that my mom wasn't comfortable with me driving long distances yet, especially in the Hollywood area. "You are lucky to have a mom who cares so much....this business will eat you up and spit you out if you're not careful! I'm paying my dues just like everyone else does, just hoping to get noticed. It's unhealthy for a youngster like yourself to get caught up in the ugliness of what it's really like behind the curtains. I hope you'll never have to experience it". Then Dom smiled crookedly and whispered, "Hey, they're calling for the dancers-that's you, Sweetie! It's your close-up!" For months he would wink at me when I stole a glance at him and we became 'set buddies' from then on.

One day during a dance run-through, Dom's camera was assigned to my side of the stage. After a few 'takes', the crew broke to review the films. Dom called me to his camera and said, "Look in here...watch...there you are...I got you a good close-up!" During the break he spoke about his love for the stage but more so, the need for audience acceptance. "Look at me...a handsome, leading man stuck in this overweight, fat body! The right roles are out there if I'm patient enough to wait for them. Honey, some day you're gonna see my name in lights!" He was right...less than a year later he was cast in a bit role on a weekly variety show, "Laugh In", which would ultimately launch his film and tv career.

Almost two years later, my mother became terminally ill with bone cancer. I've never regretted choosing to stay home and care for her instead of traveling with The Goldiggers to The MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas. Instead, I started college locally and found myself in a speech class at Cal Poly...our final grade based on inviting influential people in the community to 'share their careers' with the entire Communications Department. Gaining world-wide notoriety, I immediately thought of Dom...he would be the absolute perfect speaker for my assignment. Not knowing if he'd even consider making the 50-mile trip, I begged, "Please? If you do this favor for me, I'LL OWE YOU ANOTHER ONE!" Fortunately, Dom graciously accepted the offer and was a comedic hit with the college staff and my peers. I became an overnight hero and nabbed a strong and easy 'A' in the course!

What did I mean about owing Dom 'another one'? My dance replacement had been brought in and the finality of leaving The Dean Martin Show finally hit me. I tried to force back the tears as I said my goodbyes to people I knew I would never see again. During a heart-felt, Dad-like hug, Dom handed me a sealed, plain white envelope. "There's a place for everyone in this world...it's about finding that right niche that makes you feel warm and fuzzy...sometimes the answer is looking at us straight in the face and we don't even see it. Ten years ago a church member placed an envelope in my hand and said, "Son, you've got talent! Use this towards your training and education and pass-it-on in the future to someone you feel has the potential and 'the gift' to move people as you do. You will be rewarded a hundred times over in your lifetime by this one simple gesture".

That night in my room, I carefully opened the envelope to find \$2,000 in crisp \$100-dollar bills. A scribbled note enclosed said, "use this for your education and pass it on to someone you feel is deserving. Good luck...my prayers are with you and your mother..."

That one single event changed my life forever. I have 'passed-it-on' more than once, maybe even a dozen times since then. And I haven't stopped ...in time others will inevitably become recipients of a white, plain envelope like the one originally given from a starry-eyed camera-man to a less-than-seasoned young woman almost 40 years ago!

Why write about this now? Because I've thought so many times about sharing my story but never found the right opportunity to do so. And, I messed up by not letting Mr. DeLouise know that I found my niche in teaching and mentoring youth through dance and performance (I know he would be proud of me) "Dom, my set-buddy, I know you can hear me... **Thank you** for your mentorship, guidance and belief in me at a time that I was most influenced and vulnerable. You will be forever remembered as a friend who helped me to define myself as a strong, convicted individual. You made an impact on our world and now it's your time to fly with the angels..."

Written by Bobbi Dellos (12:16 am 5/06-09)

