

Carrying On the Legacy of Alley 44

Dear Fellow C.O.A.I. Members,

I'd like to share my journey with you...how I found my way into clowning, stepped away, and ultimately came back to help carry forward the legacy of Alley 44, an alley with a rich history that predates C.O.A.I. itself and gave us the beloved Charlie Award.

My love for costumes and performing began when I was just four or five years old. I was captivated by *Mr. Dressup* on PBS, a Canadian children's show where the host would pull costumes from a trunk and spin whole stories around them. That simple idea, characters born out of costumes, lit something in me. While most kids were asking for toys at Christmas, my wish lists looked like Halloween shopping lists. My parents eventually gave me a giant 50-gallon tote just to hold all the costumes and props I collected, and that became my personal treasure chest.

By age nine, I had discovered magic. I'd borrow every book on magic from the library, and right next to them were books on balloon twisting. I picked up a balloon kit from the dollar store and taught myself the basics. For a while, I bounced between hobbies, as kids do, but I always found my way back.

When I was about 11 or 12, my sister gave me an incredible gift: a year of lessons at Encore Magic in Flint, Michigan. There I studied with magician Chris Reeseman, who gave me the foundation to grow as a performer. It was also around that time that I stumbled upon a little slice of heaven on the internet known as *clown-forum.com* (anyone remember it?). That website became a doorway into the world of clowning for me. I met some incredible veteran clowns, including our own Dan Langwell and my mentor Mona Webb from Raleigh, NC, as well as peers like Christopher Sullivan and Adam Schill. We were just baby clowns back then, learning Clowning 101 and dreaming of making it to the heavily respected and talked-about Mooseburger Clown Arts Camp. Through that community, I learned just how small and connected our clowning family is and have always cherished the relationships I built there. Later on when we were all a bit older, after highschool at this point, I got to live my dreams vicariously through Christopher Sullivan and Mooseburger's Julia Bothun as they both went on to travel with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, cheering from the sidelines reading about Christopher's audition jitters, getting a contract and life on the train. I miss that website and the years of great conversations and memories we all shared.

In my late teens I had the opportunity to train with Avner Eisenberg during a 3 day workshop he taught in Michigan. Learning from Avner was unforgettable, his insights into character and connection left a lasting impact on me and influenced the way I think about performance to this day.

After high school, I worked at a corporate McDonald's restaurant that offered birthday parties. At the time, their package only included Happy Meals, cake, and ice cream. Because I could twist balloons, the restaurant began using my skills to add extra value to their parties, booking more of them while still paying me minimum wage as a crew member. It was great experience, but I eventually realized how much they were taking advantage of my abilities. It was a hard but valuable lesson in knowing my worth. I also spent several years at Big Boy, adding balloons, face painting, and clowning to their kids' nights. Between McDonald's and Big Boy, I gained a wealth of experience performing for families, but eventually, the grind burned me out. By my mid-20s, I walked away from clowning completely.

Still, clowning never let go of me. It wasn't until my late 20s that clowning came back into my life. An employer asked me to perform at a community event, and I reluctantly agreed. But once I was there, in character, entertaining families again, I felt the spark I thought I had lost. That experience reignited my passion. That one experience reminded me how much I loved being in character and entertaining people, but I still didn't fully return to clowning at that time. Instead, I joined my local I.B.M. Ring and dabbled with more magic and then about three years ago, I started a balloon twisting business outside of clown character. It took time to build, but it gave me a way to stay connected to entertaining while finding my footing again.

It wasn't until this past year that I decided to truly step back into clowning. With help from a couple scholarships, I was able to attend a life long dream—Mooseburger Clown Arts Camp. During my week at camp I reconnected with my long lost clown, acquainted myself with my new wrinkles and deep pores and designed makeup around my now slightly aged, bearded face. A new character came out of the wood work after all these years, Toby Snafu was born.

Before heading off to camp, I began looking into which C.O.A.I. alleys were still active in Michigan, even considering the possibility of starting one myself. To get a better picture, I reached out to Dr. Brian Ivory of the Mott Campus Clowns. Soon after, Sharon Fulkerson, a longtime member of Alley 44, heard about my search through Dr. Ivory and reached out to me directly. That's when I learned that Alley 44, with its proud legacy, was preparing to retire and dissolve unless someone stepped forward to continue it. I couldn't let that history fade. With the blessing of its longtime members, I took on the responsibility of carrying the alley forward, relocating it from Kalamazoo to Clio, Michigan—about two hours east.

Now, as President of Alley 44, one of the oldest clown alleys in the United States, I am committed to keeping its traditions alive while also inviting in a new generation. We meet on the third Monday of each month from 6–8 p.m. at the Clio Area Senior Center 2136 W Vienna Rd, Clio, MI 48420.

As Alley 44 turns the page on its next chapter, we remain proud of our historic connection to the CHARLIE Award, which was first established right here in our alley. That legacy continues to tie us closely to one of clowning's most cherished traditions: International Clown Week. This year, I've taken steps to honor that tradition by requesting official proclamations from Governor Gretchen Whitmer, as well as the Cities of Flint and Clio, to recognize August 1–7 as a time to celebrate our art form and highlight the positive impact clowns bring to their communities. If those proclamations are granted, I'll be eager to share the good news in a future article.

I also want to extend a special acknowledgment to Alley 19, whose tireless efforts this year to promote International Clown Week have set a powerful example. In particular, member Mark Simmonds inspired me to take action after his success in securing proclamations not only from his local municipalities but also from Governor Tim Walz of Minnesota. His leadership showed me what's possible when we ask our community and state leaders to recognize the joy and value of clowning.

During this time we are in the process of embracing our full name: The Grand and Glorious Mid-Michigan Galaxy of Clowns, Alley 44. My hope is that with the support of groups like the Mott Campus Clowns and mentors such as Dr. Brian Ivory, we can inspire younger members to join, learn, and keep our tradition alive.

To my fellow C.O.A.I. members: Alley 44 is not just surviving—it's growing, learning, and adapting. We are carrying forward the heritage of those who came before us while making room for new clowns to discover the joy of this art.

Thank you for letting me share my journey with you, and thank you for all you do to keep the clowning spirit alive. I invite you to stay connected with us, and if you're ever in mid-Michigan, join us for a meeting. Together, we can keep the laughter going for generations to come.

With gratitude and love,

Rob "Toby Snafu" Corba

President, Alley 44

The Grand and Glorious Mid-Michigan Galaxy of Clowns

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