

What Will You Do for Work?

(én Español)

“How the heck did you get a job as a mascot in professional baseball?”

That mildly annoying question that has been echoed by fans, friends, and family long after my brief career in the Minor Leagues ended in 2006. In truth, it’s not the question that I’ve found so frustrating, nor the tones of bewilderment, revulsion, or pity that often accompany it. What has bothered me so much is the fact that, after all these years, I don’t have a better answer for it. Ask me, “Hey, how’d you manage to get a job as a mascot in professional sports?” and the honest response is simple—I have no idea.

However, if you pressed me further on this issue, I might have told you the story of how a weekend job at Chuck E. Cheese led to an unlikely opportunity. I might have described how that opportunity led to a mafia-style job offer in a dark parking lot after a game. But if you asked me about the first moment that the idea of becoming a mascot entered my mind, I’d probably trace that back to a paragraph that I wrote in jest for a Spanish class at Fort LeBoeuf High School in Waterford, Pennsylvania back in the Spring of 2000.

It was my third class with Senorita Clutter. We had just moved beyond advanced verb conjugations and syntax and were about to embark on the most difficult assignment to date—a written paragraph. We were then required to read these paragraphs in front of the class and have them displayed publicly for the entire school to read. The assignment was not unlike the one we had been asked to complete a hundred times in elementary school. I suppose that’s fitting, given my reading level in Spanish at that point was somewhere between pre-kindergarten and fledgling first grader.

Senorita Clutter was a thin, athletic woman, who taught spinning classes at a local fitness and racquet club. She had a collection of knickknacks, figurines, toys, and stuffed animals that she had acquired over the years while traveling the Spanish speaking world. Having studied originally in Spain, she spoke the language with a perfect Castilian dialect. Her European lisp softened her words as she presented the class with her assignment prompt.

“What will you do for work?” she asked.

She searched the room, starting with a student in the back corner farthest from me. The student answered, and she proceeded methodically, row by row, posing the question for each student in turn, then whirled to write the appropriate words on the whiteboard behind her. I raked my memory for the things that stood out to me as a child. Police officer? Teacher? One of those diggers on *Jurassic Park*? But as I zeroed in on each of those ideas, I heard one of my classmates answer—*policía, profesor, arqueólogo*. No sooner had I thought “writer” when a jerk named Jason leapt from his seat and boldly said “*escritor*” with far more enthusiasm than was necessary.

Senorita Clutter’s eyes roved over the class, slipping up and down the rows, and one by one she bid us each to speak. I was

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seated in the last row, but she was moving quickly, and I began to panic.

She soon called on a kid named David whose parents owned a drive-up ice cream shop at the edge of town. Fresh back from his family's annual Caribbean cruise, he elaborated more on his answer than anyone in class up until that point. He explained, in perfect Spanish, that he was just going to go into the family business, running the store, selling ice cream and Coney dogs in the summer. I glowered at him, irritated both by his proficiency with the Spanish language and with his apparent ready-made career. Then it struck me. If he was just going to do what his parents did, couldn't I? Could this assignment be that easy? Maybe the answer was as simple as telling the class what my dad did. No problem; I just needed to figure out exactly what that was.

I didn't fully understand the full scope of my father's business at that time. His career seemed to have layers. He worked for a company where he bent sheet metal into surgical sinks, mortuary refrigerators, autopsy tables, and something called a "cadaver-go-round"—a sort of combination lazy Susan-dumbwaiter for dead people. Throughout my childhood, he and I would go "bumming around town" and on these occasions we would show up at the shop where he worked. When I was really young, he'd buy me chips from the vending machine and I ate as he wrapped up a bit of innocuous paperwork. When he was done, he would take me on a tour of the place on an old forklift—but only when nobody else was there. In hindsight, I suspect that would probably qualify as an OSHA violation of some type, but for five-year old me, it was a great way to spend a Saturday. As I got older, the forklift rides were traded for tutorials, during which my father showed me how to make some of the stranger products they manufactured.

Sitting there in Spanish class, watching *Senorita Clutter* drawing closer, I thought of what my dad had shown me just that prior weekend. He had taken me into a super-heated corner of the shop that was tucked behind long plastic strip curtains, spattered with dried foam insulation. He pulled out a series of steel molds, smeared on some sort of industrial lubricant, then showed me how to use the valve at the end of a hose to inject the chemicals into the steel molds. We worked a full day on these and produced a stack of large foam boxes.

“What are these for anyway?” I remember asking, as I built the cardboard boxes that would ultimately be used to ship the foam ones.

Dad peered over the wire frames of his glasses. The t-shirt he was wearing was already flecked with dry foam from the week before and his thinning hairline glistened with sweat.

“Skin,” he answered coolly and without pause, as if this was the most reasonable thing in the world.

“What?” I gave my head a little shake. I couldn’t have heard that right.

“They’re for human skin. For transplant.”

The horror must have shown on my face because he went on to a very detailed explanation of biology and medical technologies that I found more than a little confusing at the time. Finally, he tried his best to spell it out for me.

“Say you got burned in a fire,” he said. “The doctors might need to graft the skin from an organ donor onto you to help save your life. Now what if the donor is in Pittsburgh, but you need the skin in Cleveland? That’s where these boxes come in.” He gave one of the boxes a thump on the lid. “The doctors will put the donor skin into these boxes and send it on a helicopter to Cleveland. The skin must stay at a certain temperature in order to be viable for transplant, and these foam boxes keep the skin at

that temperature so that it doesn't go bad before they are grafted onto the person who needs them. Understand?"

I did not. At this stage of my life, I was not what you would call "a thinker." But I nodded just the same.

Sitting in Spanish class, I broke his explanation down into the most fundamental parts. It seemed simple enough, on the surface. Maybe I could write my Spanish paragraph about that?

I rifled through my Spanish to English dictionary, for each of the words, and wrote down the sentence, "*Quiero hacer cajas para la piel humana.*" Simple. Roughly translated, I had just written down, "I want to make boxes for human skin."

It was at that moment that I realized that some people might consider my dad's job a little creepy. As I re-translated those words, my mind immediately flitted to the film *Silence of the Lambs*—that scene where Buffalo Bill was dancing naked in front of a camera while wearing the dead scalp and skin that he harvested from his victims. It was an image that made me realize that reading that sentence aloud would probably destroy all hope that I would ever have for a normal social life.

I wasn't particularly popular in high school. Then again, I wasn't entirely unpopular either. I fell somewhere in the middle, eccentric enough to endear myself to teachers and keep the number of my friends down to a manageable minimum. Still, I was close enough to "normal" that I could generally find a date to school dances if I really wanted. However, with this one sentence, I was teetering on the edge of social suicide. All I needed to do was say aloud those words that I had written in my notebook and declare for the entire class that what I most dreamed of doing in my life was making giant boxes that had no tangible purpose other than holding and storing human skin.

No. That's the kind of thing that'll get you an appointment with the guidance counselor, and possibly a permanent spot on the no-fly list.

I scribbled out that sentence and refocused my attention to the subject of jobs. Unique—not creepy—jobs. There had to be something. Something out of the ordinary. Something that no other student would pick. Senorita clutter shuffled closer. And then, it struck me. Over her shoulder, I saw a strange, green stuffed animal sitting on her filing cabinet in the corner of the classroom. The sheen of its fake fur shone in the light of the overhead fluorescents. It triggered something. The creature was familiar. I focused on the fur, and then another image rose to the forefront of my mind like a messianic vision. It was a large bird, lime green, and covered with that same fur. A giant parrot!

A few summers before, my dad had taken my sister and me to our first Major League Baseball game to watch the Cardinals take on the Pirates at Three Rivers Stadium. It was the year or so after Mark McGwire broke the single-season home run record, and they had already announced plans to tear down the stadium so that the franchise could move to their new home at PNC Park. My dad thought that was as good a time as any to make the trip, to show us the stadium that his father had taken him to as a kid. He wanted to share that memory with us before the stands were reduced to a riverside parking lot that would serve the new ballpark. I remember filing up the concrete stairs when the song “Surfin’ Bird” boomed from the stadium speakers and, to a chorus of cheers, a giant neon green parrot streaked across the infield below. He strutted about the warning track, smacking the palm of his oversized baseball glove, joining a few of the players for a quick game of catch during pregame warmups.

As quickly as the memory came, it was pushed aside by the sensation of Senorita Clutter’s eyes clamping onto me.

“*Benji?*” she called me by my Spanish name, “*Y tu?*”

“*Un momento, por favor,*” I said.

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I retrieved, again, my Spanish to English dictionary and leafed through as quickly as I could. Finally, I fingered the page that I was looking for and answered her gaze with three words.

“*Mascota de profesional*,” I said, offering what I had hoped would be an innocent smile.

“*Mascota?*” Senorita Clutter asked, somewhat accusatorily. Then, thinking I must have had the wrong word, the corners of her lips curled into a smile. “*En Inglés?*”

“I would like to be a professional mascot,” I said confidently.

My classmates chortled around me and I watched Senorita Clutter’s jaw slacken slightly. Her eyebrows drew up and she blinked her wide, blue-gray eyes at me. The laughter continued, directed more at her expression of befuddled amusement than at my absurd career choice. But hey, at least this choice was better than “maker of skin boxes,” right?

That night, I sat on my old twin bed, scribbling my paragraph on a piece of loose-leaf notebook paper. When I finished, I cut it out and pasted the words onto the piece of colored construction paper. I drew a few pictures—a baseball, a glove, and a bat. Then, wanting to add just a touch of flair, I remembered the baseball cards that I had hoarded as a child. They were on the shelves inside my closet. Hidden among them were several specialty cards that depicted the team mascots of every Major League franchise, and among them was the Pittsburgh Pirates’ Parrot.

Perfect.

I dug through the collection and pulled that card from the plastic sleeve that held it. I took a small piece of Scotch Tape, folded it over, and used it to affix the card to the construction paper so that the surprised parrot appeared to be reading my words, dancing in celebration of my stated career goal.

When the time came for us to share our writing with the class, I read my paragraph aloud and then pinned it to the

Daniel Ruefman

display wall outside Senorita Clutter's classroom. Ultimately, I claimed an "A" on the assignment and then moved on without giving any additional thought to the matter.

After all, it was just a joke. Right?