

2017 Honors Award

Walter Kowalsky's Comments on Receiving 2017 Honors Award Printed with Permission

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So, you may know him as Fluffy, but I know him as Richard. I met Richard the day after I met my (now) husband, Roger, some 28 years ago. I asked Richard to join me tonight, #1 – Because I love him, #2 – Because he's enriched my life in so many ways, #3 – She opened doors I never dreamed existed...Yes! She's my Auntie Mame). But more about Richard in a moment.

I would be remiss if I didn't do this upfront – thank those who supported me through my years out here, and especially through this Honors process. In particular, I want to thank Todd Alessandro. Todd wrote such a beautiful and heartfelt nomination that I almost thought he was talking about someone else! I had an instant connection with him 5 years ago. He's not just my best friend...he is my family, and I know that I will be his "Richard" 28 years from now. So...to him and the others who supported me unconditionally, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I also want to thank my husband Roger, who plays more of a role in this award than you know – and I will tell you why.

I've been with Roger, in total, 19 years. Ten days from today, we'll be together 14 years...consecutively. Yes, we took a 10-year break. But in our total 19 years, Roger has – endured hundreds of drag shows; he's endured wigs on his nightstand; makeup on our towels; sequins and glitter everywhere (but in hour food); gowns where shirts should be; and the never-ending expense that comes with being in drag. If you don't know it, Drag is beyond expensive!

Most importantly I want to thank Roger for unintentionally opening the door to the giving part of me...through someone named Donna Piranha. And, here's how –

Some of you will remember that back in the 70's, 80's and even 90's, drag wasn't just limited to the invasion or to the stage performers, as much of it is today. Back then, men would get in drag and just go out –for tea at Cherry's on Saturday afternoons, to dance at the Monster on a Saturday night or for Sunday T-Dance at the Ice Palace. It was an expression of freedom, whose sole purpose was to have fun, and, of course, have cocktails.

When I met Roger, he was living with Richard and a guy by the name of Bobby Henderson in a house called Peckerwood, and I moved in almost immediately—after Richard approved, of course!

All of them knew a guy named Perry Bruce. If you knew Perry, he was a lot of things...including a drag enabler. Perry and Richard put me in my first Invasion in 1989. Richard took me to my first drag store for something to wear, called Lee's Mardi Gras in the Meatpacking District. Perry brought me dresses and gowns and jewelry and accessories every week from a consignment store on Park Avenue. Together, they started this...where was Roger? Roger was getting more and more furious because at the time, he hated drag! God, how we would fight about drag!

His position was that I wasn't a drag queen when he met me...and my position was that I'm not a drag queen now...I just occasionally wear a dress and twirl around a bar! After our fight, we would just bang it out in the bedroom and move on.

But after a couple of years, the negative impact that drag was having on our relationship was growing, especially when Perry named me Donna Piranha and got me into my first benefit – which was for P.A.W.S. at the Ice Palace. I loved everything about being on stag! Literally everything...except one thing—the feeling of being an unwelcomed stranger in the world of drag performers. I'll say more about this later.

But I saw the P.A.W.S. Benefit as an opportunity to help me and Roger! Which was this...Roger can't really hate drag if it has a meaningful, charitable, unselfish, benevolent and philanthropical purpose...can he? I mean, he's not that guy, is he? No, he's not that guy. When I was in a benefit, he was 100% supportive of drag! I found the key to peace in my relationship! SO, I stand before you tonight because, either I'm 1) a vindictive bitch who gave Roger no choice to remain silent about drag or be labeled uncharitable... or 2) I'm just a brilliant problem solver who acted in the best interest of my relationship.

Joking aside...all of this is true. And what's even more true is this: I was given an extraordinary gift in this discovery process.

I learned that finding a meaningful purpose, in every aspect of your life, is far more rewarding than living randomly. I found a purpose for drag in my life... and it has given back to me and to others in the most satisfying and unexpected ways. So... thank you, Roger, Richard and Perry for helping me find purpose in my Cherry Grove life.

If I could, I'd like to talk about my "purposeful" experience with being the self-proclaimed "Benefit Queen" ...which came with some challenges. I hope that we can learn something from it...

Back in the 90's I thought I was the perfect person to be involved in community happenings. I was young, I was passionate, I wanted to belong, I wanted to learn about Fire Island, and I also wanted to serve my "purpose" – the purpose I just talked about.

And, at the time, I was a 2nd level supervisor at AT&T for 8 years, so I wasn't a dummy! I understood organization dynamics, and I was trained to overcome obstacles. So, I was ready!

Nothing. I mean nothing. Can train you...for Cherry Grove politics...and its leadership structure! I certainly don't mean this to be negative...because it's not. I'm just saying this—in order to successfully participate in the community and to serve the greater good, my being “new” worked against me. “new” was a bad word! The regular drag performers didn't like “new.” The presidents of the associations didn't like “new.” Even the champions of the “funds” didn't like “new” ...

You know who liked “new”? The bar owners and the bar managers. The bar owners and managers loved “new”! So...let me take a second to thank my friends Meryl Facterman and Lois MacIntosh (God rest her soul) who embraced me with open arms. I got to know Meryl and Lois because of the Roger/Richard/Perry connection...and, because I was Roger's lover, I automatically became part of their family.

Meryl's first words of advice to me –

“Stop drawing your lips so big. It's unnecessary. Just go a little bit above your natural lip line—not all the way under your nose!” ... So, I did.

I soon said to Meryl – “Why are X, Y, Z, A, B, and C so hard to get to know? I didn't do anything to them and they ignore me...” Her response:

“Because they're bitter M-F's and they're jealous of your legs. Don't wear gowns anymore. Show those gams and fuck them.” So, I did.

She soon gave me my own Saturday afternoon to host Tea at Cherry's.

Lois had a different plan. Lois wanted me on stage. And it wasn't because I was this fabulous new talent or anything...it was because 1) I was new, 2) she was a business owner who was always looking for change, and 3) she saw me in a few benefits and knew that I had...something. Her words of advice:

Picture it—we're at cherry's, I'm standing next to her, and a queen was lip syncing to some ballad...and here's Lois:

“Never do slow songs. Why do they do slow songs? Slow songs such. Look—I'm even talking to you! I'm not supposed to be talking to you! I'm supposed to be looking at her and drinking!”

She gave me my first one woman show at Tides and I will never forget it. So, thank you, Meryl and Lois, for helping me at a time when constructive help and support was difficult for me to find out there...especially for new people. I miss Lois so, so much.

So now, I have Roger, Richard, Perry Lois and Meryl who gave me the confidence to build my own brand out there and not focus on others.

I was soon picked up by Donald Labohn for the Doctor's Fund Benefit Shows, which started at Cherry's, again thanks to Lois and Meryl. I met life-long friends in the process because he generally had the same cast. It was then that I knew I found my place out here. It even got me booked into Bella's Show at the Ice Palace...which at the time was a coveted position!

In 2014, I was elected Homecoming Queen. So, this was mine and Roger's first year back together after a 10-year break. And yes, here we go again! I'm back with him, I love him, and now...

I'm Homecoming Queen. Drrrraaaagggggggg. And I'm thinking...how can I convince him that this is a benefit???

In retrospect—while it may not be a typical benefit, as Homecoming Queen, you do perform a community service, right? It was absolutely, positively the best summer of my life. Roger would agree.

Soon after that came other benefits, including benefits for the Dunes Fund, for prostate cancer, and later "Save Our Community House" and the Fire Department.

But in between, the Concerned Women of the Grove came into my life, and this is where I'd like to conclude...

The founders of CWOG are the shining example of how to build a legacy in Cherry Grove...and that your legacy will continue without you...if you let it.

I was first invited into CWOG as a guest performer, and I continued as a guest for several years. I soon became the host and got to know the fabulous men and women that made up the CWOG committee. I found that they were driven by one thing and one thing only—raising money. Not ego, not fame, not notoriety. Just...the benefit itself. Ahhhhhhhh finally!

CWOG ended 2 years ago after a 17 year and \$1,000,000 run. This year it was picked up by a new... (notice the word *new*???) group of dedicated women who are calling themselves "CWOG The Next Generation). I was witness to the passing of the baton between these two selfless groups, whose sole purpose is to carry on the good work that was started by the Founders. They don't know this but watching this happen was one of the most meaningful experiences I've ever had in Cherry Grove. And, I am beyond privileged to be a part of it.

On a side note...CWOG The Next Generation raised \$60,000 last week!

I'm highlighting CWOG because I'd like to leave you with some thoughts for your consideration.

If you're in any kind of leadership position out here...be it the president of an association, the manager of a bar, the owner of a business, the founder or treasurer of a fund, the headliner of a drag show, or just someone with influence...

Please. Do. Not. Discard. Or. Be. Afraid. Of. "new."

A lot of things come with the word "new." This includes change ... innovation ... transformation ... re-design ...and even "Next Generation." Yes, some of this is a little scary because we all think we know what is best and we know how all of this is supposed to go...

But think about what happens when you can't do this work anymore... what happens to the many years of work and dedication you put into your cause? Shouldn't everyone in community service positions constantly be working toward passing that baton? To work toward ensuring the continuity and longevity of their work?

Many of us... we do important and necessary work out here – it cannot stop – simply because you do!

I am imploring you to include the "new."

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I implore you to educate the younger generation. Do not assume that everyone knows what you do! I'm here 28 years and I'm still not sure I know what the Memorial Fund does ... I know it's important and their money goes to a lot of good places ... sorry, Richard Shack!!!

I implore you to fight not only for diversity ... but inclusion. Diversity and inclusion is what this island is supposed to be built on – but I believe we are only 50% there.

I implore you to open your minds to the new ways of doing old things.

I implore you not to settle for making a mere \$1000 over last year but find ways to make \$10,000 more.

I implore the younger generation to have patience, understanding, and an open heart. Lifetimes have been spent developing what you take for granted ... so give it respect.

Congratulations to my peers Sue Panzer, George McGarvey and Roland Michely. I couldn't be in a better class and I'm honored to share this evening with you. You have each found your own purpose in Cherry Grove and I personally thank you for all that you have done.

I have had the time of my life over the past 28 years, and I thank you for your continued support.