

# Afloat and Ashore in 1970s Chicago (Or, How I Learned to Earn a Living, Again)

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Notwithstanding some underwater archaeologists, there are very few stories of a shipwreck launching a career. But I have one, and here it is.

My boat went to the bottom in a heavy “nor-easter” after it bashed against the Grant Park seawall in late September 1974. Any lingering thoughts I still had of taking her down the Mississippi to the Bahamas and becoming an islands charter captain were dashed as well. It’s as if I’d christened my soon- to -be revitalized career in Chicago public relations with a bottle of champagne across its urban bow.

The sunken craft, a stylish little Chris-Craft cabin cruiser with a deep navy-blue hull and a white superstructure, had been aptly re-named CHASE, partly because it was an acronym for my first and middle names – Charles and Edwin – but also because the word CHASE captured the presumed essence of a newly-spawned bachelor’s life.

In early spring, I had first navigated the CHASE from its winter home in Kenosha south to Diversey Harbor in Chicago’s Lincoln Park, not far from my old apartment. On some mornings I awoke to frost on the deck. But it was a nice feeling to be docked right in my old neighborhood near the shore, where I could visit familiar haunts.

In May, my mooring was put in place in Grant Park Harbor, right smack in front of Chicago’s legendary Buckingham Fountain. I was assigned to that prime location because the Park District office mistook me for an alderman of the same name. Mine was the first boat into the harbor that season, where I tied my deck lines to the floating mooring. There I set up housekeeping, bobbing in the light chop of the gigantic harbor, which was beginning to fill with moored boats of all sizes. I could row ashore aboard my 8-foot dinghy.

As the summer dawned, with its soft warm breezes, life did seem good. The soft lapping of the waves against her wooden hull outvoiced the nearby Lake Shore Drive traffic.

A typical day for me began with rising at first light, often awakened by a glowing tangerine ball of sunlight from across the lake, dining on a half melon on the stern deck, then a quarter mile swim out to the long break wall separating the boat from the outer harbor of Chicago. I'd jog along the break wall to get some exercise – I was then an energetic 30-year-old.

Weekends, I'd drop by the bar at the yacht club, or meet friends there for a harbor cruise and a swim out on the lake, or bar-be-que along the shore. I stayed in touch with some of my old business associates, and we'd talk about the vicissitudes of the Chicago PR business.

In late July, I had lunch with Hank Robertz, who was a principal with a growing graphic arts firm that I'd done a lot of work through when I headed Midwest advertising and PR for Toyota. He told me that one of his good clients, McDonald's, of increasing hamburger fame, was looking for a new account executive at its national PR agency, Cooper and Golin. He said Carl Kay, a former sports marketing guru, and now the McDonald's account VP, was a very good guy I should meet.

I gave Carl a call, just to talk PR and perhaps hear what I was missing in the Chicago job market. I had been left with a bitter feeling about working for a PR agency, as my six months at Burson Marsteller had ended abruptly when the client, Sears, had internalized much of our communications work for them. I had sworn to myself that the PR agency business was too skittish for me.

While still hoping and thinking of chartering in the Bahamas, where I had taken in the boating scene on a college vacation and had later studied navigation on the GI Bill, I had yet to make any solid plans. So, I gave Carl a call. He said to come over to their office to chat, at 360 North Michigan Avenue, along the Chicago River, several floors above the famed London House jazz club. Today, the building is home to the trendy London House Hotel.

I remembered that my business suits were in storage at my brother's in Naperville. Carl replied, "Just come as you are. It's OK. I heard from Hank

that you're living on a boat. Pretty cool!" So, wearing shorts and a sweat shirt, I rowed ashore in the dingy, walked across Grant Park, and up the elevator on Michigan Avenue, not then realizing I was taking the first steps away from an imagined life of serenity in the Bahamas charter business and back into the frenetic world of Chicago PR.

### **It was an hour that changed my life**

While I didn't know it then, my ship had come in, and I would work and grow through rapidly growing responsibilities on the McDonald's PR account from 1974 to 1981 and set a course that would take me to retirement at the cusp of the Millennium. In the 70's, I was to enjoy having a front seat in helping craft the community involvement backstory that added character and fostered positive public perceptions of a newly ubiquitous brand, then rocketing into national and global prominence.

Carl and I hit it off immediately. He was curious, creative and appreciated my professional background. He also took note that my best school friend growing up, Jeff Seeberger was a budding franchising executive at client McDonald's and that Mike Quinlan, a mutual friend from our college days, was already a senior executive with the fast food firm. 11 years later, as Chairman and CEO, Mike would become my boss. As it turned out, knowing Jeff and Mike then gave me useful insights into the company.

While I'd been skeptical about going to work at an agency again, I became intrigued with the idea of working for a single major client -- McDonald's -- where I would have broad senior responsibilities for building all aspects of public relationships for this fresh brand, fast becoming known to every household. But little did I think then that I'd come to play a key role in a communications program that would help propel McDonald's to soon become a global business leader.

Carl asked how much I hoped to earn. I think I requested the pay be in hamburgers. Carl took me in to meet agency chairman Al Golin, who had made a cold-call on McDonald's corporate founder Ray Kroc in 1955 and got a PR retainer fee from him, before Kroc had ever run his first ad. Al was outgoing and jovial, though I could tell he was looking askance at my un-professional dress.

Nonetheless, I landed the job, as an account executive on the McDonald's corporate account. I began commuting from the boat to my new private office, overlooking the river and the Wrigley Building. I must have looked like something out of GQ, rowing ashore each morning in my new 3-piece suit with a briefcase, tying the dingy up and walking the half-mile to Michigan Avenue.

But there were two problems working and commuting from the boat moored off Buckingham fountain. First, when the boat rolled at anchor, my work papers would often slide off onto the deck. Second, sometimes it rained. Rowing a boat ashore, awkwardly holding an umbrella under my arm, was a good trick. And by now, it was September, and with fall coming fast, it was time to think of moving onshore.

I found a nifty studio apartment at Two East Oak Street, at the confluence of Oak, State and Rush Streets – the nightclub district. It faced toward the Loop, on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor, and had a wall of windows, with no shades or curtains. There were no neighbors within several blocks, so I didn't add any and moved in with just a blanket, a folding chair I'd found in the hall, and a duffel bag of clothes.

### **I was camping out in a high-rise**

But it didn't matter. I was busy learning the client and working long days and then unwinding at pubs near the office or my apartment most evenings, with my new account group friends.

Then, at the end of September, I received a devastating phone call. In a severe early fall storm, a fierce wind had blown down the length of the lake from the northeast, with dramatic damage to areas of the harbor that were open to the surge. The CHASE had been in the bull's eye. My twin bowlines attached to the mooring had held. But the force of the wind ripped the decking around the bow chock, and the boat was dashed against the cement seawall. Her bottom finally cracked, and the boat sank right there, in front of the great fountain.

They had raised the wrecked boat with a scow crane; it was now drying out in a sling alongside the Chicago Yacht Club, where they'd identified me as the owner. The CHASE was a total loss. Any thoughts I'd harbored of a cruising career were over, then and there.

My life was quickly re-centered around a compact agency account team. There were usually about six to eight of us plus support staff, who worked full-time on the McDonald's national corporate PR account and the local Chicago area franchisee PR account. Not to mention Al Golin, who had been a trusted confidant and advisor for 20 years, not only to company founder Ray Kroc, but president Fred Turner and other board members. Al's agency partner, Max Cooper, a former comedy writer, had just left to become the McDonald's franchisee in Birmingham, Alabama, where he would one day own more than 20 McDonald's restaurants and "earn more than Bob Hope," as we liked to say around the office.

Our McDonald's account group of the 1970s was not – most of the time – much like the paranoid agency types portrayed in the TV series "Madmen," which captured the Chicago and New York advertising agency atmosphere of the 60s. Our account VP, Carl, now known as Bear, set the tone as a family man who often had the account group over to his sprawling Evanston apartment for all-day Sunday brunches with his wife and two young kids.

Those account people became like extended family, and while it was something of a revolving door, with some staying with the account or the agency for just a year or two, others grew professionally for a decade or more, and several remain close friends four decades later. One very creative account executive, Lynn, the sister of playwright David Mamet, had once worked at Penthouse magazine. She told us she had written both the magazine's sexy reader questions and the "expert" answers, often while sipping coffee in her kitchen dinette wearing a bathrobe and slippers.

We worked long, intense hours, often into the evening, at our Michigan Avenue office, with several of us making one or even two rushed daily round trips on the crowded expressway to McDonald's headquarters in Oak Brook, 15 miles away. Some evenings, when we'd head down the elevator well after dark, we'd see famous jazz musicians tuning up on the stairs for their 10 o'clock show at the legendary London House jazz club on the first floor.

We had to blow off steam, and we'd often gather at night, with other young account people of the agency, at a hotel bar around the corner, or at the famed Wrigley Bar across the river, where we'd mingle with the ad types from McDonald's marketing agencies, Needham, Harper Steers

and Abelson/Frankel, or later, Leo Burnett. Some lunch times, especially when the client had been yelling into the phone for an hour, we'd trip a few blocks to Ontario Street just east of Michigan Avenue to Ron of Japan and make a two-hour lunch of rounds of saketini's and sushi. The fact that most of our circle worked 60 to 80-hour weeks made us a cohesive group.

I first met Ray Kroc, founder of McDonald's Corporation, at a luncheon fundraiser at the Conrad Hilton, where comedian Danny Thomas honored Ray for a large contribution. We sat at a table with Ray's personal physician, who was traveling with him because of his multiple health problems, including diabetes. Ray's doctor caught the attention of everyone at the table when he speculated that anyone who could invent a device people could hook up to under the table, to relieve themselves during such long banquet speeches, could make a fortune.

Shortly after joining the agency, Carl brought me out to Oak Brook to meet our senior-most client, Paul Schrage, executive vice president and chief marketing officer. Paul was very gracious to me, and said he thought my consumer advertising and PR experience with the hot Toyota brand would be relevant to working in support of McDonald's.

It was already fall, and one of the agency's largest PR projects for McDonald's was swinging into the final phases of planning, and I was put in charge. My first account experience was with the McDonald's All-American High School Band, made up of 102 highly talented high school musicians from every state and D.C., plus a band staff of a dozen or so. The band would rehearse over several days in New York City and be cast into a unified group to march in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The Golin agency then produced the entire All-American Band program for McDonald's, from local to national publicity to all the behind the scenes logistics of assembling and training an enormous band of youngsters.

### **Never been a detail person**

I had a short attention span, which I've heard is not an uncommon trait of creatively-inclined people. But that was no excuse. Apparently, I was successful at over-compensating for my inherent weakness on details, as to this day, when I meet one of my old agency associates on the band project, their greeting is often, "Check with Chuck."

The Band was indeed a crush of detail. But it added up to waves of local and national positive publicity and community relations for McDonald's, ranging for school send-off events in 102 towns hosted by local McDonald's franchisees, to hundreds of newspaper articles and TV and radio interviews of musicians selected. This culminated in many minutes of valuable scripted network television coverage of the Band's performances in the Macy's Parade, as well as the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena on New Year's Day. It was a model local community relations program, keyed to the school band culture and linked to a major national payoff in positive public relations results. That band was truly a Norman Rockwell painting in motion.

I also remember from the mid-70s visiting the breezy open rooftop of the World Trade Center, with the young band members, and looking out across the harbor with them at the Statue of Liberty. It was a moving experience, but one that became bittersweet in memory in 2001. One of my last business lunches in New York, before I retired at the end of 1999, had been with a financial journalist at the Windows on the World restaurant near the top of Tower One.

One of the key logistical supporters of our sprawling band PR program was our travel consultant, Vicki, who oversaw arrangements for the band members and staff from all over the country. She was manager of the Loop agency, Board of Trade Travel, and later owner of Victoria Travel. I was the client for her largest corporate account, and I remember the moment she first stepped into my office door. I didn't have a clue then that the intelligent, dark-haired and well-dressed young woman who smiled and caught my attention that day, and whom I was to work with over the following several years, before we ever went on a date, would in 1978 marry me.

The band was only the tip of the iceberg of the PR responsibilities for megalith client McDonald's. While the Band is no more, because of soaring logistical costs, a McDonald's Jazz Band went on for some time, and the annual McDonald's All-American High School Basketball program, inspired by the Band, just celebrated its 41<sup>st</sup> anniversary.

In the mid-70s, McDonald's had only a single person on their corporate staff to manage PR, and he was an old-time marketing guy, not a PR expert. He was frustrated by his job, because company management would turn to the agency first for PR advice. So, McDonald's entire PR

operation remained concentrated in our agency staff when I joined them in 1974.

One of my jobs was to do McDonald's financial PR. McDonald's had become a publicly owned company in 1966. Because I had some financial relations experience at Toyota, I became the financial publicist. Virtually every financial and corporate news release issued by McDonald's from 1974 until I left Golin-Harris in 1981, was written, distributed to the media and otherwise handled by me. I came to think that the value-added I brought to financial relations was that of a layman translating esoteric financial data into plain English, which was the only way I could understand it myself.

Years before McDonald's became a global top sponsor of the Olympics, I found a way to help the company elevate hamburger-flipping competitions among its restaurant employees, which McDonald's called "crew members." An executive in McDonald's personnel department, who saw the morale and training benefits of these friendly competitions in making fries, hamburgers and shakes, challenged the agency to wrap it together into a program to introduce to the entire McDonald's national restaurant "system." I got the assignment and poured through hundreds of pages of notes and reports to come up with a compelling program.

For more than 40 years, McDonald's conducted eliminations in McDonald's Crew Olympics every four years, sending the global winners to staff the McDonald's restaurants, the only fast food restaurants permitted, inside and outside the summer and winter Olympics Games venues.

### **At the zoo**

One of the first unsolicited ideas I'd come up with for McDonald's came out of my enjoyment of zoos, like the one in Brookfield behind my old high school and the famous one in Lincoln Park. Our former family neighbor from Riverside, Les Fisher, who had taken over a few years before from Marlin Perkins, directed that zoo. The zoo has a special area called the Farm in the Zoo, which is a compound like the buildings on a family farm, where city kids can see cows and horses, and pigs and chickens in a setting to which few otherwise have access. I suggested to McDonald's, in an early attempt to paint them with a responsible



reputation for food quality and integrity, that they offer to sponsor that area and rename it, “Old McDonald’s Farm.” But a messaging focus on food quality and nutrition was a decade in the future. My good suggestion was ignored.

One of the things we did for our client was scan their own local markets and look for successful public relations stories that could be packaged and shared. We took a sort of Rorschach test of local creativity.

I sometimes think the term “public relations” is a misnomer, and has come to often imply something slick, like the negative image of political “spin”, or the cheap promotion of Hollywood or music celebrities. Sometimes, those interpretations are valid. But more often than not, authentic “public relations” is really all about “building public relationships.” A public relationship is one that a person, an organization, or a brand, has with an entire large group of people, sometimes in the trade referred to as a “target audience.” Such a “target audience” may comprise customers or potential customers, or those “influencers” who guide public opinion. Today, social media like Facebook or Twitter develop even more personalized empathy with members of target audiences.

Using the broader definition of building meaningful public relationships, one of the best company examples of such a program that I was fortunate enough to become involved with at its early stages is the Ronald McDonald House. These are housing facilities, with all the features of a private home, available free or at low cost, to the families of seriously ill children to stay, while the child is being treated at a nearby children’s hospital. Some 8,000 family members a night now find shelter at Ronald McDonald Houses.

Today, there are 368 Ronald McDonald Houses and related Ronald McDonald Family rooms near children’s hospitals around the globe. The houses had been named after McDonald’s iconic clown because of the positive, hopeful image the clown character then represented. Thousands of community volunteers staff and support the Ronald Houses, and thousands of family members a night benefit from these sanctuaries. I’m amazed at all the good that selling enough hamburgers and fries can do.

At Cooper and Golin, we were scanning the country for great new community relations ideas for McDonald's to seed nationally. Ways the corporation and its franchisees and employees could share their success with the communities they serve. Our goal was not just good PR results, but to build on the pride the franchisees and employees felt for the business.

Our Chicago market PR account person, Pat Healey, came across the case study of the creation of the first house, in Philadelphia. She was looking for a big idea for the Chicago franchisees. It was becoming clear we were onto an idea that had legs. And, even before that second house opened, we were getting queries from McDonald's markets and children's hospitals in other areas of the country about the feasibility of a local Ronald House. Soon we created a National Advisory Board to explore possibilities and criteria for expanding into more Ronald Houses.

I was fortunate to have been among the creators of that original board, and to function as its first coordinator. I wrote a detailed manual on how to explore feasibility and create local Ronald McDonald House charities, and I put together the first national conference for those interested in exploring such projects for their communities. When we attended the rainy grand opening of the nation's 2<sup>nd</sup> Ronald House, in Chicago in 1975, officiating was Ray Kroc, Chicago's Mayor Michael Bilandic, owner George Halas of the Chicago Bears, along with visitor Leonard Tose, owner of the Philadelphia Eagles.

1975 was also McDonald's 20th anniversary, and our PR efforts ranged from 1950's nostalgia to projecting how many French fries it would take to reach the moon. Company founder Ray Kroc spoke from the stage of the Chicago Civic Opera House over one of the first live satellite hook-ups to assemblies of McDonald's franchisees, and a gala anniversary celebration was held at Chicago's Palmer House Hotel. We photographed Ronald McDonald balancing 20 Quarter Pounder hamburgers on a silver platter. A record 30 million regular hamburgers were served at the nostalgic 1955 price of 15 cents each in a national promotion on April 20th.

## **Birthday for a billionaire**

Ray Kroc's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday was in 1977, and Gerry Newman, the company's chief accounting officer, challenged Al Golin to have the agency come up with the perfect birthday gift for the billionaire, to be presented on behalf of everyone associated with McDonald's. What do you give a person who has everything tangible he ever wanted? I came up with the idea. It was to create, in Ray's name, a new charity that could help boost the development of the budding Ronald McDonald House program. It would be called the Ray A. Kroc Ronald McDonald Children's Fund, and it would provide seed money to begin each new Ronald House. McDonald's employees, franchisees and suppliers contributed millions. It became the charity for the entire McDonald's System.

In late August, '77, Al Golin received this poignant telegram from a grateful Ray Kroc: "We never would have made it without your help. We were immature amateurs with virtually no friends. Thank you, Al, a million times. "

Ray died in 1984, and his charity was ultimately renamed Ronald McDonald House Charities, and is now one of the largest and most-highly rated children's charities in the world. It is supported not only by the McDonald's System, but by other companies and also by millions of McDonald's customers and friends worldwide who make small contributions on a continuing basis. RMHC supports not only Ronald McDonald Houses and Family Rooms, but mobile Caremobiles and educational activities related to children's health.

Another big idea that sprouted from the mid 70s was the first united national marketing event for McDonald's famous sandwich, the Big Mac, which had first been introduced in restaurants nationally in 1968. McDonald's aggressive marketing director David Green wanted it to be a full "vertical" campaign, engaging all the resources of advertising, public relations, sales promotion and store displays.

The idea of the "Big Mac Attack" was that a customer felt a hunger attack coming on, and only a Big Mac would satisfy his craving. We were charged with developing a PR campaign for the national promotion. I remember brainstorming with a couple of my agency associates in the empty bathtub of a freelance writer we'd retained for the project.

We created an editorial cartoon for the wire services, portraying a giant gorilla fending off planes from the top of the Empire State Building while holding a Big Mac in one paw to satisfy his “Big Mac Attack.” We created contests for customers to beat the clock reciting the Big Mac Jingle:

“Twoallbeefpattieslettucesaucepicklescheeseonasesameseedbun.” Soon, the Big Mac Attack and the jingle were part of the media and the public’s contemporary vernacular.

Lest I gloss past the nation’s Bicentennial too quickly, it was clear to us that an American business icon like McDonald’s had to recognize the country’s 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, for the benefit of our customers and the McDonald’s family of employees and franchisees. The smoke was thick in our conference room as we brainstormed how best to mark the occasion. In the end, we created a PR campaign called McDonald’s Trees for America.

McDonald’s would plant 1776 trees in each state in the union, with the first tree planted by the governor on the state capitol grounds, along with leading area McDonald’s franchisees, creating not only state-wide publicity but providing a good opportunity to solidify relations between state officials and their McDonald’s constituents. Account Executive Pat would travel to each state with a silver shovel to coordinate the logistics and publicity for each capitol tree planting ceremony throughout the Bicentennial year. She never forgave me for doing the Hawaii planting, but I reminded her that I also did Billings, Montana. We planted the very first tree with the company’s USA President, Ed Schmitt, at the Morton Arboretum, a major suburban Chicago botanic garden, and featured a photo of the ceremony in the company’s financial annual report to shareholders.

The All-American Band also performed Bicentennial concerts, from Liberty Square in Philadelphia to Carnegie Hall to the Kennedy Center to Chicago’s Symphony Hall to Balboa Park in San Diego.

One of the joys of my job was working with Aye Jaye, the talented comedian and circus character who served as the “training Ronald” to all the people who played Ronald McDonald around the country. One of my early experiences working with Aye Jaye was at the nearby Butler Polo Grounds, which proved to be an elegant setting to entertain important McDonald’s guests. One such guest I was asked to host was

Daniel Ng, McDonald's partner for Hong Kong. We took him to the Sunday polo game, and there was a special photo session after, with the winning team captain, plus Paul Butler, Miss America, Daniel Ng, and Ronald McDonald. As the silver trophy was passed around and the photos taken, I found myself trying to shoo-off Aye Jaye from pinching the bottom of Miss America. Aye Jaye was known for his practical jokes, and part of our job was to see they remained private, and that the press never caught on to the real comedian behind the famous clown.

The original Ronald had been created by the Washington D.C. McDonald's ad agency and played in early commercials by Willard Scott, a local DJ who went on to become the famous TV weatherman. Willard has always been proud of his McDonald's lineage, and we included him in many later events, including some for Ronald McDonald House.

### **Then there was Chef Rene**

Ray Kroc, when McDonald's had its headquarters on Chicago's LaSalle Street, before moving to suburban Oak Brook, in 1971, liked to dine in style. One of his favorite restaurants for lunch was the Whitehall Club, a private dining establishment in the prestigious Whitehall Hotel. The club's classically trained European executive chef was Rene Arend, formerly of the Drake Hotel. Ray had kidded Rene for some time, telling him he could make a lot more people happy and share his talent if he came with McDonald's. Eventually the idea sunk in.

For double his salary at the club, Rene finally agreed to come over to McDonald's as its first executive chef. A special kitchen, which included both McDonald's equipment and other gourmet and experimental cooking gear, was installed for Rene and his new staff on the top executive floor at the new Oak Brook headquarters. One of the first new menu items he completed was the Chicken McNugget, adapted from an idea of company president Fred Turner's wife Patty. What Rene added, which made the McNugget famous, was the classical French concept of serving them with a choice of sauces, to add distinct flavors to the chopped and battered chicken entrée. What many don't know is that the mustard sauce long available with McNuggets was based on a recipe Rene had created at the Whitehall Club.

At the agency, my team came up with the idea of touring Rene to daytime women's television shows. But there was a problem, one that

required a specialized public relations skill to resolve. Rene, though possessed of a charming European accent and a good sense of humor, had spent his life in kitchens and was totally unused to public speaking. In fact, when he spoke to another person, he usually stared at his own feet.

We set up the kind of small, portable demonstration kitchen that might work on a commercial TV show and went to work with Rene. The training, which with many executives might have run to two or three days, entailed two weeks of grueling effort for Rene, and us. But in the end, he was ready for prime time.

The first Hamburger University management training center, then based in its own building in suburban Elk Grove, was not a cooking school. The students were new McDonald's franchisees and restaurant managers, who were expected to already be familiar with the basics of how McDonald's kitchens and service operations worked. HU, as they call it, was a place for refining management and organizational skills, and achieving a Bachelor of Hamburgerology degree was a requirement for a career at McDonald's. When I joined the corporate staff in the mid-80s, one of the first requirements was that I earn that degree.

In the late 70s, HU was approaching a milestone – it would soon celebrate its 10,000<sup>th</sup> graduate. This would be another marker for the astounding growth and success of the business, and also demonstrate how serious the company was about the leadership in its universe of local restaurants. I came up with an idea to publicize the occasion, one that would require the personal participation of Ray Kroc, and Al Golin loved it. I asked Al if he would approach Ray to discuss it, and he said, "You call him."

Ray said, "Fine, great idea Chuck, just tell me when to be at HU and I'll do whatever you want." Ray had a profound sense of public relations opportunity. The idea was that Ray would have his photo taken congratulating the 10,000<sup>th</sup> graduate of HU with the school's dean under the massive lighted roadway Hamburger University sign, which stood between the building and the busy Northwest Tollway and was seen by tens of thousands of motorists every day. The bottom of the tremendous sign mimicked the regular McDonald's roadside signs with the new wording, "More Than 10,000 Graduated," and the number would increase each time another thousand graduated.

McDonald's had developed a lot of experience with local charitable telethons. So, it was probably not surprising that McDonald's become the first national corporate sponsor of the Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. Many McDonald's markets across the land participated in raising funds in the restaurants for local MD telethons. Our job at Golin/Harris was to provide creative materials for local markets, and to manage the relationship with the MDA and the national telethon, broadcast from Las Vegas. We would recruit and train franchisees and restaurant crewmembers to fly to Vegas, to present contributions from their markets to Jerry on the live national telethon. I was lucky to be just off stage one night when Jerry and Dean Martin were reunited at the Telethon after many years apart.

As my own experience with McDonald's expanded, I took on additional responsibility for communications in the growing international area. I recall chatting with the agency for McDonald's in Germany, who was looking for ideas to launch the first company restaurants in Hamburg. A light went on, and I suggested the theme: "the hamburger returns to Hamburg." McDonald's was opening up new countries rapidly, and the strategy was to launch public relations tactics to cost effectively introduce the brand to new countries prior to beginning advertising.

Another area of focus for me became public policy. We were increasingly involved in educating young people about nutrition, ecology and safety, and leadership in minority affairs, and I worked on creating educational and legislative and media positions and materials for the client's public affairs division.

The public service role of PR has often been under-played, but two important innovations in public service were the result of ideas we generated at Golin/Harris in the 70s. We would often send the company executives ideas that we thought could have positive application in their business, even if the public relations value was limited. One of the best examples was in a memo I sent to the officers responsible for restaurant operations training in 1975. The memo attached news articles reporting that the American Medical Association had officially endorsed the "Heimlich Hug" technique for giving first aid to those choking on food. I wrote, "Perhaps this information...and appropriate 'How To' instructions should be operationally communicated to all restaurants as well as included in training for management and crews. The humanistic

value of such life-saving techniques seems to be rather compelling.” Though the lawyers at first balked about liability issues, McDonald’s began saving customer lives soon after.

### **Seeing menus for the blind**

Another first a few years later was creating a way to offer menus in brail nationally. It was a franchisee’s idea to make McDonald’s more accessible to blind customers. We struggled with how to make this concept more available to the U.S. System. After contact with national organizations that serve the vision-impaired, we learned there was a new technology that would enable brail to be imprinted on a permanent piece of heavy plastic. After some experimentation, we figured out how to produce the basic McDonald’s menu, without prices, so it could last a while, on sturdy, easy to clean plastic sheets and distribute them to every McDonald’s in the nation. In one fell swoop, and for a budget of just over \$8000, we’d made McDonald’s the first national restaurant chain to offer its menus in brail. That was a home run that went beyond conventional public relations to real innovation in public service and was another deposit in what we came to call the McDonald’s Trust Bank of positive relationships.

### **It wasn’t “Fair”**

One of the biggest projects I’d had the chance to spearhead for McDonald’s also became the largest project we ever cancelled. Long-time McDonald’s franchisee in Knoxville, Lytton Cochran, was elected a director for what would become the 1980 Knoxville World’s Fair. Before the age of the Internet made them largely obsolete, world’s fairs were global expositions of technology, trade and tourism that rivaled and even exceeded the draw of the Olympics. Cochran was a good friend with Fred Turner, then Ray Kroc’s successor as McDonald’s Chairman, and he prevailed on Fred to think about creating a McDonald’s-sponsored pavilion at the fair.

Fred and his people were thrilled with the fitness and health-themed pavilion concept we proposed. Then we ran into a wall we just couldn’t get over. When we further analyzed the projected attendance of the fair, and where visitors would travel from, we realized that their projections were exaggerated and unreliable. We expected to be criticized for



proposing scuttling the concept, but Fred Turner praised our candid directness in doing so, despite what McDonald's had already invested.

The agency partner and executive vice president who later headed the McDonald's account, Chuck Gelman, together with his wife Gay, had become great good friends with Vicki and me. We often dined together and traveled to Spain and Italy together on vacation. Back at the office at 500 North Michigan Avenue, when the client had us rattled, which was fairly often, Chuck and I would sneak around the corner and down a few "Stolies" over ice for lunch. On such days, when we returned to the office, we'd usually close our office doors and settle into some quiet copy editing or speech writing, which seemed to go swimmingly after a few beverages.

In early 1981, Ray Kroc was experiencing more frequent illnesses, and the U.S. McDonald's president asked to have the agency prepare contingency plans in event of Kroc's death, as his own iconic status as a business pioneer had taken on the significance of a Henry Ford or Thomas Edison. The confidential plan I developed was based on my experience as an Army planning officer for the Kansas phase of the Eisenhower funeral of 1969. Our plan included family coordination, a notification plan with stockpiled, ready-to-finalize staff memos, press releases, memorial ads, videotape and photography. When Ray died, three years later, a frenzied Al asked Fred Turner what to do. Fred simply replied, "Just implement the plan."

Later that year, I came to realize that after 7 and a half years on the McDonald's account, I'd come as far as was likely, as a senior VP. It would later turn out to have been just the beginning of my McDonald's career. But I was lured away by Baxter Labs, a Deerfield-based Fortune 500 health care technology leader, for a position on their senior management team to head corporate communications. Baxter valued my creative work and broad, high profile consumer PR experience. I would be moving back into the corporate world, where decisions get made and budgets created, and agencies hired. I'd be testing myself in the prestigious high-tech health field – making a dramatic swing from healthy food to health care, so to speak. I took the job.

Little did I think then, that three years later, my old client Dick Starmann at McDonald's headquarters in Oak Brook would offer me the opportunity to head corporate communications for their company, my

beloved old client. I'd have the public relations, media relations, internal communications and charitable functions of this Dow Jones 30 company reporting to me. I'd have the satisfaction of becoming an officer of the company I had long served and also be chief corporate spokesperson for the McDonald's brand.

An odd twist was that my direct employment with McDonald's made it a conflict of interest for Vicki to handle McDonald's travel, by then her largest client. She later confided that it was a welcome relief, in that I had always negotiated tight profit margins and required a crushing seasonal workload.

My odyssey with McDonaldland and floating into the thick of the 1970s Chicago PR agency world had begun with the sinking of my Chris-Craft.

As the 1980's and new professional opportunities were dawning, Vicki and I purchased a half interest in a compact old sloop called the Mai Tai, moored near the very anchorage in Grant Park Harbor, where the CHASE's untimely demise had sent me ashore nearly a decade before.

There would be a couple more boats later in my life, up at Lake Geneva, but never another that went to the bottom – and in so doing launched a McCareer.