

## **Vermont Arts Council**

### **Transcript**

#### **Vermont Made, Episode 14**

#### **“Clowning from Within with Circus Educator Troy Wunderle”**

**This document is available in large print upon request.**

#### **(00:00):**

[A loon calls over a soft, bright guitar riff, songbirds twittering in the background.]

#### **Desmond Peeples (00:05):**

You're listening to Vermont Made: the show where Vermont creatives tell me, Desmond Peeples all about something they've made. And in this episode, master clown, Troy Wunderle, tells me all about a life made in the circus. Troy is a born in Vermonter who has traveled the world with the cream of the circus crop and returned home to spread the joy of his art. For almost 30 years, Troy has taught circus to all ages as a freelancer with Circus Smirkus and with his own company Wunderle's Big Top Adventures. He frequently works with Vermont schools through the Vermont Arts Council's Artists in Schools program, and in 2022, he received the Excellence in Circus Education Award from the American Circus Educators Association, a national honor awarded every two years since 2014. Troy spoke with me about the essence of clowning, his unique approach to teaching it, and Vermont's unusually vibrant circus community.

#### **(01:01):**

[A short loon call plays, accompanied by songbirds.]

**Desmond Peeples (01:04):**

That must feel really great to receive that honor from a national organization after all your years of work in the field.

**Troy Wunderle (01:11):**

It's not only heartwarming, it's surprising, it's reassuring. I've absolutely adored the career that I've had. I've been incredibly grateful to work with amazing people, to tutor under amazing people, to tutor people that are now amazing [laughs]. It's gone full circle in many, many different ways, and I'm grateful for every opportunity I have. To be honored in this way was a real pat on the back that the outside world also sees value in what I do. And as an artist, I don't think there's anything that gives you more reassurance to keep going than to have colleagues in your business basically saying what you do is of value and keep doing it.

**Desmond Peeples (01:53):**

Absolutely. How many years have you been a circus educator?

**Troy Wunderle (01:58):**

Yeah. I started my career in the mid '90s. I was a graduate of the Maryland Institute College of Art. I got a Bachelor of Arts degree in graphic design and thought that was going to be my career. And as a senior, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus blew into town and was auditioning clowns for their clown college. And I thought that was absolutely phenomenal. I did a lot of research to try to figure out what that meant and whether or not that was an avenue that I might enjoy pursuing. I'm sure you'll want to hear the full story, but for right now, to answer your quick question, I've basically been in the business for 30 years.

**Desmond Peeples (02:42):**

Well, yeah, you were saying you were going to art school. You did not intend to go into circus arts?

**Troy Wunderle (02:50):**

Oh, not at all. Not at all. What everyone knew of me as a younger student was that I was painfully shy and I was more comfortable in the woods or in the rivers, fishing or working on a dairy farm, than I was out in public. So this would never have been an occupation that someone would've imagined I would find as a kid. I grew up with a rather creative family. We lived in a log cabin right here in Saxtons River, Vermont. Lived between two dairy farms and worked on one my entire childhood. And that was my life. The outdoors was my life. But also creativity. My parents were incredibly creative human beings and raised four kids really in a way that allowed us to understand the value of thinking outside the box. So this became an interest of mine to pursue many passions, not just one.

**(03:48):**

So when I was a high school senior at the Bellows Falls Union High School, it became apparent that an art college option was good for me because it offered a wide variety of avenues to pursue. I loved it all. And I do to this day still love way more than I could ever focus on in one given day or one given year, or I think one given lifetime. But art college seemed right. I went to art college for four years, absolutely adored every minute I spent there. Worked my tail off. But when Ringling Brothers came to town and was auditioning clowns for clown college and I started researching what that meant, I realized as a clown, you had to be diverse in skillset. You had to paint, you had to draw, you had to sculpt. It was helpful to speak different languages. It was incredibly convenient to be athletic.

**(04:38):**

You had to enjoy traveling. You had to be passionate in that world about animals and in many cases exotic animals. You had to be comfortable traveling with people from all over the world. You had to be an adventurer. You had to be someone that woke up every morning glass half full and said, "How am I going to make the most of this day?" And when I started really digging in deep and I realized, wait, I always thought that when you grew up, you had to do one thing. And all of a sudden these folks that were out there touring on the road were doing multiple things on a regular basis and I realized, oh, that intrigues me. So I was unbelievably fortunate. I auditioned with no training whatsoever besides just things that I had taught myself or been taught by my dad. I was a juggler at age ... I guess fourth grade, my dad taught me how to juggle. And then because I took to that as gifts, I was given devil sticks or diablos or roller bowlers or unicycles, all these random things. But there wasn't circus in Vermont that I knew of. I knew nothing about that world.

**(05:40):**

So even though I had many of the skillsets going into my first audition at Ringling, I knew nothing about circus and I knew nothing about clowning. What was fascinating about the early career for me was I was a graduating senior with a degree in graphic design, and a gentleman called my school and said, "Hey, I am looking for someone to do design work for me." And the school was keen enough to put me in contact with this gentleman. And he said, "You sound like the right guy. How soon can you start for me?" And I went, well, I had just started researching clown college, knew I wanted to audition and realized I couldn't focus on doing design work at that time. I was taking more credits than I was allowed to. I had been selected as the senior speaker in college so I was writing the senior speech for graduation. I was doing design work for the Baltimore Museum of Art. I was doing an

Andy Warhol exhibit at that same museum. My plate was full. And this gentleman wanted me to, on top of all that, do his design work. And I realized, boy, on top of all of that, I want to audition to this clown college, and I cannot tell my first potential client that I can't work for him because I want to go audition for clown college [laughing]. That's a quick way to lose your first professional gig.

**(06:56):**

But after a little bit of hemming and hawing, he finally got it out of me and I said, "Well, I'm auditioning for a college." He said, "Well, what college?" I said, "Oh yeah. Well, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Clown College." And there was that very understandable and recognizable pause on the other end of the phone. And then he says, "Well, that's weird." And I said, "Well, I know it's a little different." And he says, "No, that's really weird." And I said, "Well, why do you say that?" And he said, "Because I know someone that went there." And I went, "Who?" And he said, "Me." And I was like, "You have got to be kidding."

**Desmond Peeples (07:30):**

Wow.

**Troy Wunderle (07:31):**

So what the college realized was they had a performer call the college looking for graphic design and I was a graphic designer who was starting to become really smitten with performing. But they didn't tell me that. They just put us together. So of course, I zipped right down to the—I was in college in Baltimore, Maryland—I went right down to the harbor, met this gentleman, fell in love with his story, and he gave me a lot of books to research and ideas to think about when filling out the application. Long story short, I ended up auditioning there in Baltimore for a clown college. Came

well over prepared. Many people just came as themselves. I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I brought a set, I brought a sound system. I brought an hour long show that I had created with all the props to go with it, and everyone else came just in jeans and t-shirts. I was like, oh my goodness.

**(08:21):**

So anyways, at the end of that audition, the director at the time looked at me and says, "I see great potential, but I want you to research what clowning is, and I'd like you to come back in Washington DC when we do the auditions there." So Mike Rossman, this gentleman who was a former clown college grad, took me to that audition. And I really was brave. Being an art college student you're taught to really think outside the box. And I wrote an act that was pretty risky, but it caught their attention and I was fortunate enough to be one of just 33 students that year that was accepted to clown college. Thousands applied, 33 of us got accepted. And the story got even better. I left Baltimore, Maryland and went to Baraboo, Wisconsin, where Ringling Brothers held clown college for three separate years.

**(09:10):**

So I show up in Baraboo, Wisconsin, and I walk in and the very first gentleman I meet comes up and he shakes my hand and he says, "You're Troy Wunderle." And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "How do I not know you?" And I said, "Oh, you have no reason to know me. I know nothing about circus. I'm brand new to it." He says, "Yes, but you are a Vermonter." I said, "I am." He says, "I should know you." And I said, "Well, why do you say that?" He says, "Because my name is Rob Mermin. I'm the founder of a company called Circus Smirkus based just two hours from your house." And so that absolutely dropped my jaw. And I realized, wow, this is unbelievable timing. He was a co-director of clown college that one year. We had to go all

the way to Baraboo, Wisconsin to meet each other. We hit it off famously and upon graduating from clown college, I was fortunate enough to be one of just eight that got an accepted chance to tour with The Greatest Show on Earth. And Rob looked at me and said, "The minute you leave Ringling, I've got a job waiting for you in Vermont." And that just absolutely blew my mind.

**(10:11):**

So sure enough, I did tour with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in the mid '90s. Had the time of my life. Was with the first troop that went to Mexico as well. But when it was time to leave Ringling, I came back. Two days later, I gave Rob and his second in command Ozzie Henchel a handshake and that was the start of an amazing 26-year career with Circus Smirkus. So I've had an absolute amazing experience over my adult life with them. I had two children grow up in their ring. Anyone that's seen Circus Smirkus in the last 20 years has seen either Emily or Ariana grow up in that ring. They were my clown partners at the age of two, and both have now graduated from that program and have moved on to amazing things. My oldest, Emily, is now a graduate from Rider University with a musical theater degree, and spent the summer with a fantastic contract down at Hershey Park. And my youngest, Ariana, is at college right now, but last year broke a world record for wire walking and just made it into the Guinness Book of World Records that just came out last week.

**(11:25):**

My wife jumped in this wild journey with me as well. When I left Ringling, I came back and married my high school sweetheart, Sarah, and she worked for Smirkus for 15 years as well. So it was quite an experience. 2007, I started my own company, Wunderle's Big Top Adventures, and work solely for that company now running 15 different programs that I'd be happy to

talk with you about. But my career really took an amazing turn when Ringling Brothers called me back up after spending years with Smirkus and said, "Hey, we'd like you to direct the comedy for our shows." And I spent six magical years writing all of the comedy for 11 straight Ringling shows and running their version of clown college at the time. So as this little Vermont boy who grew up on a farm fishing half the time, it's been an amazing journey to go out and play circus on very, very big platforms and also remain grounded here in Vermont and do a heck of a lot of work locally.

**(12:32):**

This award was given to me in 2022, simultaneous to the fact of me having taken my circus programs through Smirkus and Big Top Adventures into schools over the years. Every week I bring my program into a different school, and at the beginning of 2022, I had marked a great moment in my career where I had coached over a hundred thousand kids how to become a performer in the circus ring. So that number's quite ... It's expanding every week, but I take a lot of pride in that. So I think the award hinted towards my varied career with many different circuses and also just the volume of work that I've done here in New England and super proud of it all.

**Desmond Peeples (13:24):**

Well, I would love if you could just summarize: what is clowning to you?

**Troy Wunderle (13:31):**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Clowning is an attitude. What I love about clowning... There's many different forms of clowning. I have a lot of circus skills. So some people would look at me and say he's a skill-based clown because a lot of my comedy is based off the physical feats that I will be doing in addition to the comedy and mirth. But really for me, it's all about the attitude. The way in which you approach life. The way in which you face adversity. Clowns



are always bouncing up against adversity. And showing the world a more artistic, more creative, more optimistic way to overcome these failures and challenges to create a vibrant life out of whatever life gives you. So for my style of clowning, it's very personable. It's very interactive. For me, it's really important to be there in the moment and real. My material varies every time I perform it, even if I've done an act for 30 years, based on who is there experiencing this activity with me.

**(14:41):**

So for my type of clowning, I no longer wear the big colorful wigs or the big floppy shoes. In some venues, I do have some subtle European style face paint, but in many cases, I'm just Troy. And it's the actions and the attitude of what I present that make people go, "He is a clown." So for me, it's not about the wig, it's not about the shoes, it's not about the costume. It's really about the way in which you approach life and the way in which your approach to life inspires others to think in a more expanded way. My type of clowning, ideally, if I'm doing my job right, has a lot of heart, a lot of empathy. It's accepting of all, and it's joyful. My company's motto, Big Top Adventure, their motto is to spread joy, create memories, and inspire dreams. And it is absolutely amazing to me how that can happen in any avenue, in any venue, simply by stepping in as a clown with an open mind and an accepting heart.

**(15:44):**

I bring my programming into jails. I bring my programming to daycares. I've performed for presidents of the United States. I have been in schools with toddlers or with college students. I've performed with professional athletes or incredibly talented Hollywood actors. The variety of opportunities I've had is incredible. I've performed in other countries. When we went to Mexico, it became very obvious that some parts of clowning are universal. People love

to laugh. People love to be engaged. People love to be surprised. And some of those things are universal. Whereas other things are very specific to individual cultures. So I remember when I was in Ringling, I had to figure out first what the American audience wanted to see. And then we went to Mexico and our comedy fell flat for about a week until we figured out what is it that the Mexican audiences want to see. And then we got really good with that and we came back to America and we had to remember what it was that we did initially that got the American audiences laughing.

**(16:48):**

I had an opportunity to go to Cuba and direct some programming for the National Circus in Cuba. And it was absolutely amazing to again, face a different culture and try to figure out what is it that we can bring from our uniform interest in this art form that can work in a different culture? I was successful there with my colleagues by basically bringing art and music into the clowning there. They're a very vibrant culture. And to bring that in really allowed them to become incredibly creative in their own ways. So yeah. For me, comedy and clowning is all about having an open heart, an open spirit, and trying to do goodwill out in the world and spread joy as often as possible.

**Desmond Peeples (17:34):**

What sort of programming would you bring to jail? What would that experience be like?

**Troy Wunderle (17:41):**

I've done that many times. I was often brought in for family days. So let's say over the holidays, I would be brought in because it might be mom and dad's one chance a year or one of few chances a year to be in the same room with their children. And initially, I know I was being brought into this

environment to entertain the children as mom and dad reunited, and I went, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no. That's not what I do. I'll get there and I'll get the kids engaged, but I'm not doing my job right if dad doesn't also want to jump in, and if mom doesn't also want to partake." And it really became this unbelievably powerful program that allowed people to forget the hard realities of life and to celebrate each other. One of the things that Big Top Adventures does on a daily basis is try to figure out what the unique elements of each individual is and allow them to expand.

**(18:35):**

Clowning is not something you discover, it's something you uncover. And I try doing that with everyone that I work with. What is unique about you, and how can we uncover and celebrate that? And even in these jails, it was amazing how in, I would guess, 20 minutes time, you no longer remembered you were in the jail. You no longer remembered that there were guards watching you. You were celebrating this moment with your family. Incredibly powerful work. I loved it. Hospital work. I've gone to many hospitals and brought clowning into hospitals and had unbelievably powerful experiences. The one that I'll never forget... and there's many... but one that I don't mind sharing now, was I walked into a gentleman's room and a nurse waved to me and said, "Oh, not that room." And I said, "Oh, well, why not?" And she says, "He doesn't talk to anyone." And I said, "Well, that's a perfect time for me to just go in." And I chose to go in and I kept my distance. He was in a wheelchair and he was across the room, and he did not turn around as I entered and I didn't say anything. I shared that space with him for a moment.

**(19:39):**

And as I shared that space, I looked around the room and I happened to notice that there was a birthday card on his table. Now my daughter is the

singer. I am not. But I quietly chose to sing Happy Birthday to this gentleman. And no reaction, nothing. And then I just said, "I hope you have a wonderful day." And as I'm turning, I hear his wheelchair creak and he rolls around and he is bawling. And he looked at me and he said, "That is the kindest thing anyone has ever done to me." So I think clowning, it's not always about the big fancy stuff. It's not always about the skill, the technical skill. It's not always about being the funny man in the room. Sometimes it's about empathy and just really being able to look around and absorb the environment you're in and accept that environment and try to bring the best out of that environment. And I sat with that gentleman for about a half an hour, and we talked about everything. And when I left that room, that nurse looked at me and she had no words. She goes, "I don't know what you just did in there." And I said, "I opened my heart." [Laughs] But it's amazing.

**(20:44):**

Hospitals, jails, daycares. I do circus programming in Connecticut. I have a school that I've gone to do circus programming there for 26 years straight. And I work with toddlers there, [laughs] you know? It goes up to sixth grade, but I work with 13 month olds there. So how do you take a program that a 13 month old can be engaged with and use the same equipment to entertain a sixth grader? And I love that. I love that every moment of my work is important. Every moment counts. I can't get sleepy, I can't be tired. I can't let illness affect my ability to make sure that every instant I'm around someone else is an important instant, because treasures and discoveries come at all times. As a clown, you're an improvisationalist. So whatever someone gives you at the time, that is the reality and you improv off of that. Sometimes it's with great heart and with great empathy, sometimes it's with humor, sometimes it's with sarcasm. It all varies, every venue you're in.

**(21:43):**

And that's what I love about clowning is, there is no certain set of rules. You just go and you do it. And what clown college taught me more than anything was that really clowning comes from within. And that was the kindest thing I could have been told in clown college because I was there as a newbie, trying to figure out what in the world am I doing and how do I do it? And basically they said, "Who are you and how do you act? How do you think? And then maybe just expand upon that a little bit. Explore larger versions of those thoughts, those interactions, those reactions." And that was easy, because I know me. And that's what I try to share with everyone that works with me. The only thing you know is you, and you are different than everyone else around here.

**(22:28):**

When I directed for Smirkus as an example, COVID shut us down one year. My partner, Mark Lonergan and I had wrote a show that we were incredibly proud of and very passionate about. We wanted to get out in front of the audience, and we lost that opportunity because of COVID. Well, we brought that show back once COVID allowed us to do another tour. But that show that we put out that next year was entirely different. Same show, same theme, same concepts, but because there were different kids that were a part of that troop, all the ideas went out the window and we had to write all new ideas. And that's what I think I love about clowning and circus in general, is the moment is the only moment you live. The moment is the most important moment, and you plan for that moment. You try and become prepared for the moment ahead of time, but whatever that moment gives you, that's your reality and you run with it.

**(23:19):**

So I take a lot of pride in those type of opportunities too, where what could be perceived as something devastating happening turned into a real gift. Whereas a creative mind, you realize you could take the same concept and just a year later create an entirely new show out it. And I think clowning is all about creativity, and having a creative mind inspires me to keep going and to share my ideas and attitudes with the world as I can.

**Desmond Peeples (23:49):**

Something you said is really resonating with me, that the clowning is uncovered. It is not discovered. It's something that you uncover.

**Troy Wunderle (23:56):**

Yes.

**Desmond Peeples (23:58):**

I really felt that in the story that you told about the man in the hospital in the wheelchair. How in whatever environment we're in, whatever situation, there are big emotions that we can uncover and access if we just help each other a little bit.

**Troy Wunderle (24:16):**

Absolutely.

**Desmond Peeples (24:17):**

Yeah. I know that you have received an Artist in Schools grant for this upcoming year from the Vermont Arts Council. Is that right?

**Troy Wunderle (24:31):**

Absolutely, yeah.

**Desmond Peeples (24:32):**

Could you tell me a little about what you're going to do for that?

**Troy Wunderle (24:34):**

Sure. I'm an Arts Council representative through the programming that I do in residencies. And what the Arts Council has been very kind to do for me over the years is support the residency work that I do in schools. So when I arrive at a school, I have an 18-foot trailer absolutely loaded to the brim with circus equipment. I enter the school on day one knowing nothing about the kids, nothing about the community, nothing about the show that I'm going to create. Just knowing that we will create magic within those five days. We will create a program that will allow that community to come and celebrate their youth. I don't think the world does that enough. I'm very proud through my program to do that every single week. So, the Arts Council has been very kind to me over the years and has presented multiple schools with the funds to help bring my residency program to their communities.

**(25:28):**

So that has happened every year I've been doing residencies and continues into this year, and I couldn't be more grateful. It's really fun to collaborate with an organization that is out there promoting good art and promoting good leadership and promoting good work in communities. I am booked every single week throughout the entire school year, and a third of my next school year is also booked already. And I couldn't be more proud than that. I'm a self-employed human being. I run Wunderle's Big Top Adventures right here from my house and studio, and enough communities see the value, feel

the value, and fight to get the funds to allow that programming to work in their community, that I couldn't be prouder. It's really, really heartwarming to be able to feel as though I can go around most parts of this state and feel like I'm coming home. That's my favorite part. I don't go to a school and do a job. I go to a school and become a member of that community. It's one of my favorite things. The deep connections I've made with students, with teachers, with administrators, with PTO members and community members, I could spend infinite hours talking to you about how much that means to me. But yes, the Art Council has primarily supported my residency work for many years and continues to do so, and I couldn't be more grateful.

**Desmond Peeples (26:56):**

I'd love to talk a little bit about the local circus arts scene. It seems to me, as someone who's not a circus artist, it seems like there's a lot of activity in Vermont. Case in point, you have received this National Circus Education Award, and then another pair of Vermont circus artists have also received the same award.

**Troy Wunderle (27:18):**

Absolutely.

**Desmond Peeples (27:19):**

The Smith sisters from NECCA and Battleboro.

**Troy Wunderle (27:21):**

Yes. Dear friends of mine.



**Desmond Peeples (27:23):**

Dear friends of yours! Yeah, I was wondering if you knew of other people who had received the award.

**Troy Wunderle (27:28):**

One of the nicest things... Yeah. And it's a biannual award, so they give it out to usually one human being. I think the sisters got it together. Elsie and Serenity got it together on behalf of their work through NECCA, New England Center for Circus Arts. But it's an award given out just to one person or one collective every two years. And yeah, two of those folks. I'm sorry, I haven't done the research, but I think they've only been doing it for four years. I think they've only given out four awards. Two of the four both came to circus organizations here in Vermont. I couldn't tell you how proud I am of that [laughing]. But yeah, no, the circus community is really vibrant here in Vermont, and all of us are doing different things, which I think is what's amazing. I hire Elsie and Serena to work for me all the time. They worked for me last weekend in fact. They hire me to work for them. And we offer each other help, creative help, artistic help, and we share resources, both physical resources and human resources on a regular basis. They're dear friends of mine.

**(28:37):**

So yeah, one of the things that I love about being in this state is not feeling as though I'm in competition with anyone. Like what I present, I have a residency program that goes to schools. Circus Smirkus does as well, but they're vastly different programs. So if a school has a Smirkus residency program, they may love that, and that may be perfect for them. Some other school may have a Big Top Adventure program and realize, oh, nope, that's the flavor that we're looking for and I want more of that. NECCA, New

England Center for Circus Arts, they do aerial work, but there's many other people as well.

**(29:10):**

Van Lodostov Circus is here in Vermont. Vermont Vaudeville is up in northern Vermont, they do a heck of a lot of circus as well, and there's more. So, very, very pleased to be in a vibrant community here in Vermont. And there's others around New England as well. But it's one of my greatest joys through Big Top Adventures is because I run so many different types of programs, I can hire colleagues on a regular basis to work for me. So I don't have employees, but I have a ton of independent contractors that work for me each year. So I do shows, I do workshops, we do residencies, we do camps, we do fundraising events, we do corporate events, we do school residencies. And for each of these different programs, I can tap into the circus world that I know, from near and afar, to bring really unbelievably world-class artisans here to work for Big Top Adventures and to service the creative needs here in Vermont. I take a lot of pride in that. As do I like getting calls from other organizations saying, "Hey, we value your opinions and ideas and creative thought and talents, and come work for us."

**(30:21):**

I think the thing that surprises me most is living in the small state that I want to live in, I knew from the moment I was born, I wanted to be a Vermonter through and through. I didn't think it was going to be possible when I headed to clown college and then I found out that, in fact, it was. And I can't tell you how proud I am to do the work that I do living here in the state. And I would say a large portion of the work that I do is actually in Vermont and I take a lot of pride in that. I go all over New England, but a lot of it happens right here in Vermont. So yeah, I absolutely adore the fact that I can do something very odd, do it at a high caliber, do it with a lot of

empathy and heart, and do it in a way where communities say, "We want you back." And I think that's one thing that's very unique to this Big Top Adventure residency world is schools commit to that programming annually.

**(31:10):**

I can't tell you how many schools have me annually. I've been to one school myself, Troy Wunderle, for 27 years, and other schools like the Sharon Academy in Sharon, Vermont actually brings me in and has me as part of their curriculum. They shut school down for two weeks, and I come in and on Monday of that first two week period, talk with the kids about how to select a theme for a show. What makes a show theme vibrant? And then I have 10 days with these students to take whatever theme they've selected and to write a fully scripted show. To write all of the skits, to teach all of the acts. The kids sew their costumes. The kids create their props. The kids play live music whenever we can get the quality talent to do so. They create a group that learns how to promote an organization, so they have to illustrate posters and get them out into the community. They have to get us onto the TV or into the news. So that's a whole piece of it.

**(32:10):**

Then they learn all the hand-eye skill or the hand skills outside of circus. We bring in carpenters that help out, and we build huge set pieces, and we build a carnival and the community comes out to play an hour worth of carnival games built by these students prior to then seeing the circus. So this is a 10-day period of time where from scratch, we create a two-hour experience that this community comes out to every single year. It's a paid event. People pay to come to this show, and we sell out every single year to the point where the fire marshal told us on year two, "You cannot do this again." So now we have to do multiple shows. And two years ago I looked out in the audience and I had a whole bunch of what I would consider 22-year olds out

there. Many Sharon alumni come back to see this show, but I didn't recognize any of these kids. And afterwards I went up and I said, "I'm sorry I have to ask, but who are you here supporting?" And they said, "Well, no one in particular." And I said, "Well, why are you here?" And they said, "Oh, we're UVM students. We just heard this was a great show every year." I was like, this is in middle school, a seventh and eighth grade show, and it's bringing in the community. So, I love that.

**(33:19):**

I love the variety that I can do right here in the state. And it varies; some schools bring me in and there is no culminating event. It's just about the exploration, the experience. Teaching the kids how to not only become comfortable with failure, but how to accept it as part of succeeding. So I talk to the kids all the time. "When you step in this classroom, you better be failing a lot because everything I'm going to teach you is hard. And if you're not failing a lot, it means you're not trying, and I want you to try. But we're not going to just fail. We're going to pay attention to what caused that failure, alter what caused that failure, and then succeed." So I call it failing successfully. And those kids, once they get rid of that stigma of not having to be perfect in our classroom, they just start to thrive. And the shows that we create for these communities at the end of the week are a little mind-boggling. These kids are working their tail off and going through an immense amount of work and a lot of creative thought and a lot of logistical challenges to pull off a show that looks easy. And that's my favorite part about the circus.

**(34:22):**

If I'm doing my job right, one of the hardest things that I know how to do, which is to design, create, direct, and produce a show, looks easy. So if I'm

doing my job right, no one has any idea how hard it's, and I love that part of what I do.

**Desmond Peeples (34:39):**

I would love to zero in on... You used the word flavor. What is Big Top Adventures' particular flavor? And I would love to talk a little bit about that. What sets you apart from other circus educators, not only in this area, but nationally? Why is your flavor so particularly...

**Troy Wunderle (35:03):**

Well, thanks for asking that, because that is something I take a lot of pride in. There's many amazing people across the United States doing circus. There's incredible organizations with amazing artisans, coaches, producers, directors, people with a lot of heart doing good work. The thing that for me, I think really sets my programming apart is it's for everyone. Now, Ringling always said, "Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages." That was supposed to mean everyone, all-inclusive. But for me, unlike some other organizations, I want to make you a star within your own heart, within your own mind, within your own soul today. It's not about training you to do something phenomenal in the future. Many of my students have gone professional. I have kids all over the world. In fact, I told you my daughter broke a world record for the Guinness Book of World Records this year. On the same page in the book she is, is another one of my students who was my unicycle student back in Circus Smirkus and he now has the record for the highest unicycle ever ridden.

**(36:08):**

Students of mine are all over the world doing amazing work. But for me and Big Top Adventures, it's really about how do we make you a star within your frame today? How do we celebrate who you are and make today relevant

make today real, make today something that we celebrate? And then how do we build upon that tomorrow, if I have a program that allows me to work with you another day, or another day, or another day? How do we build upon that? How do we take the human being that's there and train the human being as much in circus as in just life? I think teaching juggling every day, all year long in schools would bore me to death. I teach juggling every single day because it has very little to do with juggling. It has a heck of a lot more to do with how you face challenges, how you celebrate successes, how you take something that seems impossible at one moment and create an opportunity for it to be possible moments later. How do you work with adults that say "I can't, I never have been able to," and get them to say "I will, and now I can." How do you get a kid who's petrified to try anything because of the fear of failing in front of classmates, to then celebrate them on stage moments later.

**(37:22):**

So Big Top Adventure, it really is, it's about heart and it's about joy. The one thing I hear all the time is I've never seen this school so full of joy, and I take a lot of pride in that. I want the kids to wake up and bolt out of that door that morning to get there. When I do my shows... I just did a wonderful show locally where it was a combination of shows and workshops. We brought in balloon twisters, I brought in face painters, we brought in food trucks, there was a silent auction. It was a beautiful community event. And at the culmination of that, I had a lady come up to me and look at me and say, "I've never seen a performer engage the community in the way that Big Top Adventures does." And I had a team of people working there. But it really is. It's about bringing you into our world. And our world is not just circus. Our world is about optimism. Our world is about joy. Our world is about sharing, caring. Our world is about accepting everyone for who they

are and trying to take them from where they are, to a slightly heightened, better version of themselves.

**(38:25):**

I tell all the kids when I work with them, if you see that moment of frustration coming ... I say, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, be your best self right now because that's something you will celebrate. And when we're celebrating, we're in a good mindset. And when we're in a good mindset, these hard challenges become easier. And when things become easier, we enjoy them more and it's just this wonderful, tumbling ball of thrill that just keeps people going and moving forward. So I don't spend any time in my programming talking about the fears or the failures or the follies. We accept those, but we talk about the successes, the wishes, the dreams. And I think that might be a little different than other organizations. If you become a three ball juggler with me, I'm psyched for you. If you become a two ball juggler with me, I'm proud of you. If you become a one ball juggler that can barely catch it, but you smile and you style with pride at the end of your little presentation, I couldn't be more proud.

**(39:21):**

So it really is less about the technical and more about the emotional. Big Top Adventures gets kudos all the time for really being able to transform individuals to become a better version of themselves. And it's my hope that when I leave a school, when I leave a show, when I leave a workshop, that these are tools that these kids, these adults that have worked with me can use in life beyond the circus ring. And it's my hope that people really take that and run with it. I got a text four minutes before you came from a gentleman that I taught at a school that is now teaching at a school, and he just shared... I haven't seen him in probably 10 years. And he says, "You just need to know that this is now part of my curriculum and every student

that comes in takes a mental break to juggle." And he goes, "I can't tell you how many countless people you have taught to juggle by teaching me." And that's thrilling to me to hear.

**(40:17):**

It has nothing to do with they can juggle five balls. It's everything to just say they're trying, they're experimenting, they're proud of the steps that they're taking. And this little spark that you ignited is now a forest fire in all the best of ways. It is spreading. And I love that. For me, it's not about this moment and just you. It's about this moment and you and how we can empower you to then go out into the world and make your world a better place. That sounds big, that sounds heady, but I can promise you what's coming from my heart and that's what gives me great passion to wake up every morning and to put in ridiculously long hours. Anyone you talk to that has ever worked with me knows that I put in 18 or 20 hour days continuously. For the next eight weeks I have just two total days off. It's a program every day. Residencies throughout the week, shows, workshops, and strolling entertainment on the weekends. I love what I do. I'll always be passionate about it. And I think the other piece, which I'm hoping you're getting a little out of this interview, is the passion. It's just the best. And I want everyone to feel that. When they're working in Big Top Adventures, I want them to feel like they are having their best time.

**Desmond Peeples (41:35):**

Yeah. Well, you certainly got me fired up about juggling. I remember I took a Circus Smirkus... I guess I went to Circus Smirkus camp when I was younger.

**Troy Wunderle (41:46):**

Yeah, I love it.



**Desmond Peeples (41:47):**

Maybe in the late '90s. Yeah. And I was not good at juggling, and I don't remember feeling all this joy that you're talking about [both laughing]. But now I'm like, oh gosh, yeah, just give me one ball and I'll give it my best shot.

**Troy Wunderle (42:00):**

Can I share a short story? Real short story.

**Desmond Peeples (42:03):**

Yeah.

**Troy Wunderle (42:03):**

This really hits the nail on the head for me. I had a kid that was in a program a couple of years ago. His name was Bobby. And this was a middle school group, and he wanted to be a juggler in the show. Now, this was a school I had gone back to year after year after year after year. And other kids in his class had actually gotten to the point where they could juggle five balls. So I had two five ball jugglers, which is pretty amazing for a middle school kid, and Bobby who could barely hold balls without having catastrophe happen. But anyways, in dress rehearsal of that show, he throws the balls up, they collide together, and they fall off the stage. We were on a raised stage. I ran over, I picked them up, I handed them back to him. He tried again. He failed a second time. They fell off the stage.

**(42:43):**

So after that dress rehearsal, he came up to me and he said, "Troy, what do I do if I drop in the show tonight?" And I said, "Bobby, you have a heart of gold. You have a spirit that needs to shine. Do whatever makes you happy."

So sure enough, that night he comes busting out. We have five ball juggler going here. We have a five ball juggler here. Flawless, no drops. And we have Bobby go out with three, front and center. He throws them up, two balls collide, they fall off-stage. One lands at his feet, he picks it up, he throws it up. Later, he looks at me and smiles and giggles and goes, "Hey, Troy, I lost it in the lights." It came down, hit him right on the head, rolled off the stage. He looked at me, burst out laughing, dropped to the ground and started break dancing, right there on the front of the stage. Five ball jugglers on either side of him, break dancing.

**(43:24):**

My favorite part of this story is he was way worse at break dancing than he was at juggling [both laughing]. He looked like he was getting electrocuted on stage, but when he stood up at the end of this, I have a way in my show of going one, two, three, and those kids throw their hands up as do the audience and they yell, "hey," and then we celebrate those kids' efforts. Bobby jumped up, put his hands up, yelled "hey" so loud over a thousand people in that crowd stood up and gave him a standing ovation. It had nothing to do with his skill. It had everything to do with his ability to accept the fact that he may not be perfect, but he's the best him he can be. And he thrived in his moment in the ring, stood up and shared his greatest heart with that audience and connected with them. So I think the one thing that Big Top Adventures tries to do in every aspect is to connect. Connect with the people I'm working with, connect with the people I'm hiring, connect with the people that are hiring us, connect with the people that are being entertained by the products that we present. So that connection, that real life connection, I think sets Big Top Adventures apart from many other organizations.

**(44:30):**

[A loon calls, songbirds chirping in the background.]

**Desmond Peeples (44:34):**

That is our show, folks. To learn more about Troy Wunderle and see some silly circus photos, check out the show notes at [vermontartscouncil.org/podcast](http://vermontartscouncil.org/podcast). Vermont Made is a production of the Vermont Arts Council, the primary provider of funding, advocacy, and info for the arts here in Vermont, which is and has always been Abenaki and Mohican land. This episode is sponsored by the Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing. Visit [vermontvacation.com](http://vermontvacation.com) to find countless ways to enjoy our state. And if you're a new resident here, visit [thinkvermont.com](http://thinkvermont.com) for regional resource guides and job information. Thank you for listening.

**(45:15):**

[Songbirds twitter as a guitar strums a soft but upbeat tune.]