



*Mr. Potatohead from "Toy Story"*  
*Photo from the Library of Congress*

While Don Rickles' iconic career in stand-up, television and film spanned almost six decades, it may be his role in the "Toy Story" series that is his most beloved.

"Toy Story" (1995) was inducted into the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2005.

In a guest essay from his daughter Mindy, we learn more about Don's career, his family and friends, and how the king of insults became Mr. Warmth *and* Mr. Potatohead.

## Remembering My Dad: Don Rickles

*By Mindy Rickles*

The "Toy Story" saga will always be intrinsically tied to its stars, Tim Allen, Tom Hanks, and most uniquely and personal in our minds, my father, Don Rickles. His appearance as the character of Mr. Potatohead was a decision that didn't come easy, nor was it a likely match at the start, or even later in his life.

When my dad was a teenager, he enlisted in the Navy and went off to fight in the Philippines during World War II. He was scared like any kid would be, and was lucky to get back with his life intact. His parents, my grandparents Max and Etta, were thrilled to have their only child back with them.

His father was an insurance salesman, and everyone loved Max. He could find a way to connect with everyone he met, and Dad saw that. It was a trait that he would embrace throughout his life, always curious about people, where they're from, what they do. He had the tools to be a great salesman, but that didn't take. As he always said, "I couldn't close. 'So you don't want a policy? Ok then, good bye!'" Insurance wasn't for him.



*Don Rickles with his mother Etta. (1940s). Photo courtesy of Mindy Rickles.*

His story as a revolutionary comic started in the '50s as he began appearing at clubs in the Greater New York area, such as the Elegante. He opened for acts like the Oh La La Girls at strip clubs, so the crowds were not the most favorable to his initial act, which included impersonations and jokes, but he soon began going after the crowd, which was not really there for the jokes but for the girls. Instead of turning on him, they began laughing--at themselves!

He began to realize that this was a way to personally connect with his audience. He eventually refined the approach and they rarely took his insults seriously, mostly because they were hilarious, but also because they could sense that he was a sweet, warm man. Later, Johnny Carson would label him Mr. Warmth for that very reason.

It wasn't long before he moved to Los Angeles to try his hand at film, after having studied alongside Grace Kelly and Jason Robards at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York. His fine dramatic turn in "Run Silent Run Deep" with Clark Gable and Burt Lancaster in his early 30s was a very big feather in his cap and he was quite proud of that work. "The Twilight Zone" and "Rat Race" with Tony Curtis and Debbie Reynolds brought him guest spots on the big television programs of the day, such as "The Dick Van Dyke Show," "Gilligan's Island" and more. Then came a few television series that mostly disappeared after the requisite 13 episodes, except for one, "CPO Sharkey," which aired for two seasons and allowed him to be himself on screen.



*Don Rickles, Frank Sinatra and Johnny Carson on the set of "The Tonight Show." Photo from the Library of Congress.*

All the while, "The Tonight Show" booked him with Johnny Carson 100 times during his tenure on the show. He and Johnny remained friends throughout their lives, and Dad credited Carson, as well as Frank Sinatra, for making his career as successful as it was. Both men loved how Dad would rib them about everything, from Johnny's past drinking habits to Frank's Italian roots. His relationship with Frank and the Rat Pack was the stuff of legend, and it all started when Frank came to see his act in 1957. He saw Sinatra with his pals and said, "Make yourself at home, Frank. Hit somebody."

The entourage looked carefully at Frank to see if he was laughing, and thankfully, he was. Dad later said, "If he didn't laugh, I'd be on the Jerry Lewis telethon."

Dad's reputation soared after Frank called him while we were on vacation in Hawaii and asked him to appear with him at the second inaugural of Ronald Reagan in 1985. We immediately began packing and the world saw Dad poking fun at a sitting President of the United States. He and Nancy laughed harder than anyone.

From his early days in Las Vegas, he developed a relationship with Bob Newhart and his family. There were no two people more different from each other, but each thought the other was hysterically funny. Bob would manicure his act like the great writer he was, but Dad would go off his scripted act to talk to the crowd and wing it. Bob would stand in the wings, watching Dad perform and say, "I don't know how he does it. They laugh but he doesn't make any sense." Our families also became close, and my mother, Barbara, and Ginny Newhart were the best of friends until my mom's passing in March of 2021.

By the 1990s, Dad's career was still roaring along, and he scored a great dramatic role next to Robert DeNiro and Sharon Stone in Martin Scorsese's "Casino." His presence in the film was so strong even though he rarely spoke, which was remarkably out of character for him, but it worked beautifully. As his friend Sidney Poitier often said of him, "Don was a fine actor."



*Ginny and Bob Newhart with Don and Barbara Rickles celebrating Don's 90th Birthday in 2016. Photo by Ed Mann.*

None of what came before portended what would come to Dad that same decade. Never once did anyone consider Don Rickles, the insult comic, for a cartoon, and cartoons were not in his universe. He watched sports and the news, great dramas, but John Lassiter came calling for a new project with a new company called Pixar. He had written the role of Mr. Potatohead for him, and still my dad wasn't sold. John came to make a big pitch personally to him and my mom, and Dad finally agreed. No makeup, no memorized lines, just come in and read. He began to like that idea!

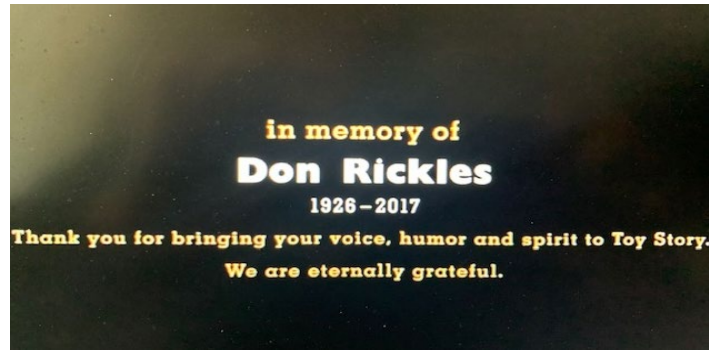
The release of "Toy Story" was incredibly well received and brought him something he always wanted, a way for people of all generations to remember him. Our kids, Ethan and Harrison Mann, certainly knew of the "act," having been to his live shows, but "Toy Story" made their Pop Pop *Mr. Potatohead*.

Three more Toy films followed, and the premiere of the third was attended by our kids. It was a very special day that we'll never forget.

After the end of the 4th in the series, Disney posted a lovely credit to my dad and we're forever thankful. Our hope, as was his, is that his name stays alive, and if it's in the body of a potato, well so be it!



*Don Rickles with his grandsons at the "Toy Story 3" premiere. Photo courtesy of Mindy Rickles and Ed Mann.*



*Mindy Rickles lives in Los Angeles with her husband, Ed Mann, and they have two grown sons, Ethan and Harrison. She, like her father, is a successful comedian, although she has no immediate plans to play a potato or any other root vegetable.*

*Essay posted in April 2022. The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*