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Why I Stopped Acting

I was that little girl who always said, "When I grow up, I wanna be an actress." I went to theatre camp, belted out show tunes to anyone who would listen, and flung my body every which way and called it dancing. By the time I reached high school, I was more interested in making movies than in starring in them.

But that little actor voice kept gnawing at me as I studied TV and film production in college. I watched actors perform and thought, "I'd like to make people feel the way they make me feel." I realized during my senior year of college that I was almost all grown up, and if I was going to be an actress, it had to be now.

That's when I met Dick Clark during an alumni trip from Syracuse to Los Angeles. Clark went around the room asking us what we wanted to be when we grew up. Figuring he was a performer and would understand, I readied myself and said, "I think I'd like to write, but maybe star, in theatre." "You want to be an actress?" he asked. "Yes," I said. Then he asked, "Why? Do you want to be poor?" "No," I began carefully. "But I'd rather be poor for two years than regretful for the rest of my life."

When I got back to New York, I enrolled in theatre school, auditioned around town, put on plays in basements, then moved to L.A. on a whim. I hustled. Every day, I placed my hopes and dreams in manila envelopes and sent them out into the world hoping they would be answered kindly. I'm not a shrinking violet, but I was suddenly overcome by shyness at the worst moments. It would take me chunks of time to make one simple phone call to

Talk Back

BY RACHEL ZIENTS

an agent or a casting director or a friend of a friend in the business who said I should call. I was in a constant state of seeking approval. I thought I was nervous because acting meant so much to me.

A little more than five years passed and, eventually, so had my dream of being an actor.

I had had success: I produced a production of *Savage in Limbo*, appeared in a few indie movies, and was a background player in *Man on the Moon*. I loved to act; I just didn't care too much for the business of acting. While playing *Richard III's* Queen Anne in a Shakespeare showcase, I realized that I had talent, but I didn't need to be a professional actor in order to express it.

A handful of other signs told me I should give up acting, such as the time an agent told me to lose 10 pounds when I was already a Size 2, or when another agent told me I had to choose between acting and having a family, or when the nerves from performing outweighed the joy.

I realized that for a while I had just been calling myself an actress, but, in actuality, I was a waitress. Now there's nothing wrong with being a waitress, and there's nothing wrong with being an actress-waitress, but I didn't want to be a waitress or an actress anymore, and I didn't want to still be slinging

drinks at 30. Something had to change.

And so I stepped aside. I didn't have a plan at first. Although I craved stability, I chose to pursue a career just as risky as acting: writing. "At least words are tangible," I thought. "I can sit in my room and create without anyone else's permission." And in a very short period I accomplished more as a writer than I had in the years I spent as an actress. And that spoke to me. It's terrifying to put yourself out there in any

capacity, actor or writer, but as a writer, I could present something and ask for it to be judged, not me. And while you can't help but take any judgment personally, putting my work on the page as opposed to displaying it through my body or voice allowed me a certain distance from the nerves and worries, so that I could make

strides for my career.

Giving up a dream is scary. I was scared that leaving acting meant I was a failure, but I wasn't a failure; acting just wasn't the right fit for me. I've always believed in following your dreams to the fullest, but I discovered there's also great strength in changing paths.

I have great respect for actors. It's why I am not one anymore, but I'm glad I tried. You should always try. Those who want it and need it are the ones who keep trying and will eventually succeed.

So the next time you see Dick Clark, tell him I have no regrets.

Zients is a freelance writer and TV producer in Los Angeles. She is currently writing a memoir about her father's death.



Rachel Zients.