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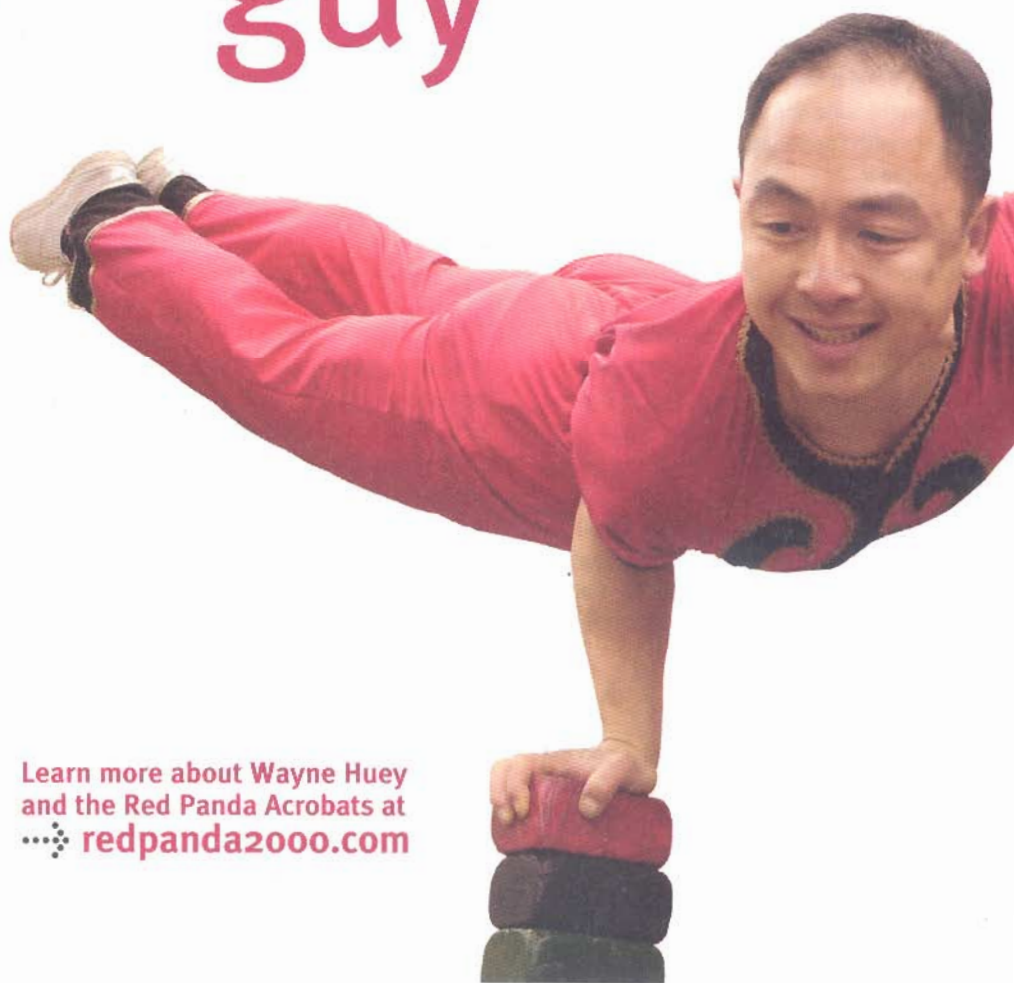
California native Wayne Huey is a man of many talents. He can bake a mean vegan scone, ride a unicycle and juggle like nobody's business. He's also been known to walk around on two hands with his body squeezed into a cylindrical red barrel.

But Huey, 41, doesn't just do this stuff for fun. He's the founder of Red Panda Acrobats, a San Francisco based acrobatic troupe with a unique twist: motivating audiences—especially children—to follow their dreams.

Wayne Huey puts a positive spin on traditional Chinese acrobatics

By Aurelia d'Andrea

A well-balanced guy



Learn more about Wayne Huey and the Red Panda Acrobats at redpanda2000.com

"When I do kids' shows, I always want to leave a lasting, positive impression," says Huey, who has dazzled audiences young and old from coast to coast with his special blend of traditional Chinese and mainstream American acrobatics. "I really want to inspire people."

Huey's desire to inspire stems from his own positive experiences with adult mentors. Reared in the city's North Beach district, Huey had what he describes as an "inner city upbringing," hanging out on the streets and attending rough-and-tumble urban schools. As a young adult, he discovered gymnastics and martial arts and met the first teacher who would help steer his life's course.

Shift happens

"She was really spunky and really alive," says Huey of former high school gymnastics coach Dixie Mahy, who, over time, revealed to her students that she was a vegetarian. It was Mahy's vibrancy and zest for life that prompted Huey to "clean up his diet" while still a teenager, and ultimately adopt a vegan lifestyle. "She was a good role model for me," says Huey, whose friendship with Mahy thrives more than two decades later.

After high school, Huey experimented with different occupations—



vegan baker among them—and kept active with martial arts, but at 22, he was lacking direction. During a brief stint at San Francisco City College, he enrolled in a course on Eastern philosophy and found his way again thanks to professor Terry Hall's words of wisdom.

"He said to me, 'Do something you love. Go for it and don't look back. Whatever happens you'll still be happy because you made the effort.'" Taking his words to heart, Huey asked himself what the one thing was that he was good at, and kept coming up with the same answer: "Performing, being on stage. That's when I decided to go off to China to study."

The idea didn't sit well with Huey's first-generation Chinese immigrant parents, who couldn't understand why their son would want to move to the Old Country to study traditional performing arts. "To go off and

join the circus is not that common," says Huey. "They thought it was a phase I was passing through."

It wasn't a phase, though: Huey was committed to his goal. Just shy of his 23rd birthday, he boarded a plane bound for Taiwan and China armed with his bags and passport, but not much else. "It was a good period of self-discovery," confesses Huey, who at the time spoke no Chinese and had never traveled outside the country. "That's where I really grew up."

The veggie acrobat

Seven years and three different circus schools later, Huey returned from his Asian adventure and began his American performing career as The Vegetarian Acrobat. "I even made a little outfit that had a carrot stick on it," he says with a chuckle, though he eventually ditched the name in favor of the more "universal" Red Panda Acrobats moniker.

With his new identity but old ethics firmly intact, Huey began landing plum performing assignments, among them an exclusive engagement at Walt Disney World's Epcot Center in Florida. Today, he continues to wow crowds at corporate functions with his noodle bowl flip, juggling act and balancing feats, though performing for children and spreading his empowering messages is what he likes best.

"Especially for little kids, there are so many choices in society today that aren't good," Huey says. To counter the negative influences youngsters are regularly bombarded with, he takes time at every show to "share a good, positive message about hard work and practice, about staying in school and staying away from drugs."

Though he feels strongly about the benefits of vegetarianism, Huey doesn't preach a veggie message while on stage. Instead, he takes a more subtle approach, telling young audiences, "Eat a healthy diet. Stay away from processed foods. Eat your veggies."

After all, that's what got Huey where he is now, and there's no place else he'd rather be.

"I love what I do. It's a passion for me. For me, training and performing is like going to get soy ice cream. I'm eating soy cream every day." **VN**

AURELIA D'ANDREA is a San Francisco-based journalist currently residing in Paris.

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