

Becoming
Magic

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Book Design and Interior by Damonza

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2021

ISBN (paperback) 978-1-7375848-0-3

eBook ISBN 978-1-7375848-1-0

Becoming Magic

A Path *of* Personal
Reconstruction

ANTUAN MAGIC RAIMONE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people who will not see themselves listed here and it's not because you aren't important to me; it's because I could not possibly list all of you without forgetting someone. To those who aren't listed, you have contributed just as much as those who are and I'm sure several of you will give me shit for not listing you, which will come as no surprise to me. ;)

I'd like to first acknowledge the voice in me that wanted to be heard. You were kept quiet for so long, by others and by me, out of fear. The people pleaser in me still gets scared about what you have to say, so I walk in faith that whatever it is will come from a place of love. I'd also like to acknowledge everyone that contributed to this book, either with your words, time or by being in my life.

To Momma, Rhon and Rob, thank you for growing towards me. There are many different ways our relationships could have gone and I'm thankful for where they are. You each have survived more than what I already know and more than I think I could. I appreciate your vulnerability as much as I do your strength.

Sis, thank you for holding my heart each time I don't have the strength to. Kittie, I honestly can't imagine what my professional life would be without your theatre program, your friendship and your love. Thank you.

Neil, your light cannot be ignored and it's what both scared and drew me to you. You are "living proof" that when we shine, we give others permission to do the same.

To my "CARE" group, THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU!
My love and appreciation for you can't be fully expressed in words.

Alabanza to my Coquito Quad, you're the "showmance" that just won't end and I don't want it to.

Candi...WE DID IT!

Daddy-O, you aren't physically here to experience this with me, and I am confident your spirit and memory are ever present. You were my first hero and villain, which allowed me to see you as the human you were, and in your human form is where I was able to most fully love and appreciate you. You lived with so many quiet fears and I'm thankful I was able to help you release some of them.

To Amie, Christopher and the CVTC, your services changed, saved and brought a purpose to my life that I didn't know was waiting for me. For as long as I live, I will do what I can to show you my gratitude.

Mike, your love for me is probably as close to what I could have asked for, without knowing how it would look. It scares me at times. I'm scared I'll fuck it up or that I won't be enough. What I know is that I can share those fears with you, you'll hear them, and we'll figure something out together.

To the reader. Thank you for offering your time and money to take in my story. You didn't have to, and I'm humbled that you did. In reading this, I want you to see yourself reflected in me. See the artist in you, the child of a single parent, the little black boy, the survivor, the only one in the room who looks like you, the person in a small town dreaming of a bigger future, the LGBTQIA+ person finding yourself, the person who's afraid, who's courageous, who's silly. Lastly, I want you to see that YOU ARE LOVE AND YOU ARE LOVED. May this find you in good health and spirits.

INTRODUCTION

When the World Stopped Moving

"The moment is everything. Don't think about tomorrow; don't think about yesterday: think about exactly what you're doing right now and live it and dance it and breathe it and be it."

—WENDY WHELAN

"BROADWAY IS SHUT down until 2021."

Did we wake up to a new reality? One without music, art, expression...*dance*? Not possible. I would need to put an eye mask back on and go beddy-bye again.

The real story: Broadway theatres did abruptly close on March 12, 2020, knocking out all shows—including sixteen that were already scheduled to close soon. This announcement came months after Broadway, my second home, grossed \$1.8 billion the previous season and attracted a record 15 million people. Much due to *Hamilton*, no doubt.

Fortunately, for me, as a universal swing, this is what I know the theatre industry to be. Every show stops at some point and when the

show ends, I am unemployed. I knew my contract was coming up, and I wasn't sure if I was going to sign another contract or even get one. I entered this pandemic of the coronavirus with a decent nest egg, aspiring to fulfill other aspirations and spend more time with my boyfriend, as basic as that might sound. You see, I've been with *Hamilton* for three glorious, mind-blowing, heart-pounding years. My personal track record has been when work stops, the universe is presenting me with an opportunity or more emotional growth. It has opened up time for other creative endeavors, like this book and public speaking, that I wouldn't have been able to do among a normal show schedule. I was comforting a fellow performer acknowledging that there can be discomfort and pain in this process, but I trust it. I have faith in what I pour my heart into. I hope I inspired her.

Change can't be stopped, no matter what we do. Sometimes we may be able to prepare for it and other times, it will sneak up on us like a mosquito. In my case, it came like a mosquito bite.

On January 6, 2020, I flew home to New York after spending all of 2019 in Chicago for work. Getting back into the rhythm of being home was a bigger adjustment than I thought it would be. Just getting to work went from a seven-minute walk in Chicago to a forty-minute commute in New York. I'd forgotten how much time I spent out of my home when I was in New York. It's very common to leave my apartment around noon and not get back for almost twelve hours. And in those twelve hours I'm surrounded by people almost every step of the way, from my walk to the train, the train ride into Times Square, and my walk to the theatre. Then I breeze into the theatre where I share a dressing room with up to eight other people. On an average day, the only time I'll have to myself is when I use the single-occupancy bathroom outside of the dressing room.

I had been home for a little more than a week when my supervisor asked me to meet him before a Wednesday matinee. We hadn't spoken face-to-face in months, and he wanted to talk to me about some changes that were going to be happening with the universal swings of *Hamilton*.

My job as a universal swing is solely to commute around the country as needed to act in the various productions of *Hamilton*. He went on to tell me that I was going to be sent to one of the touring companies of the show that was currently in Florida. He wasn't able to tell me exactly how long I'd be on tour, but it was looking like a minimum of two months. There's that mosquito I mentioned earlier.

I did my best to hide my disappointment because it's my job to travel when I'm needed, and I was needed. It still bit me in the heart. I hadn't been home two weeks and had only seen my boyfriend twice in that time. He happened to be on a trip with some friends when I got the news I'd be leaving. I'd have four days before boarding a plane to Florida, but before that would happen, I would need to pack, do an afternoon rehearsal for the show in New York, perform two different parts in the course of two different days and spend time with my boyfriend once he got back from his trip. There was a lot to do in a short amount of time.

I was stunned. I hadn't fully processed leaving Chicago, a place that had been my home for over a year, and newly getting re-acclimated to my life back in New York to now have to switch gears to go to a city I'd never been to and work with a company of people I'd never met before. I don't know how anyone could handle that gracefully, myself included, and I was trying. Am I ungrateful for my job? Not in the least. Am I finding it hard to keep rolling with the ever-changing tide that keeps coming? Absolutely! There have been days when I've felt overwhelmed and wanted to scream for the world to stop moving, but I know it won't. Instead, I stop, take deep breaths and give myself one task to focus on. Once I've done all I can for that task, I move to the next one. I also listen to music. It's much more enjoyable to hear than the running lists I have clanging around in my head like pots and pans. I also ask others for help.

As my departure got closer, I knew I was going to need a mental health day from work, so I asked for it and got it. I spent my last day in

New York with my boyfriend, at my apartment. It might not have been as much as I wanted, but it was at least what I needed.

As I mentioned before, change can't be stopped and can be a disruptor. Change can also be an opportunity for us to grow. It can offer us the chance to speak up for ourselves and ask for what we need. If you find yourself overwhelmed by changes in your life, be it personal or professional, take time to ask yourself, "What do I need now?" Do you need to take time for a walk, to call a friend and talk out what you're going through, or take a hot shower or soak in a bath? What is something you can do for you? No one else will give you what you need until you ask for it, and that goes for asking yourself as well. And there may be surprises around the corner. Like an unprecedented global theatre shutdown!

Over the months since the coronavirus made itself known, the world has transformed and there is no binary way to describe it. What I will say is that it's overwhelming. For everyone. There was a time when many of us didn't have to think about what our day-to-day looked like. Whether we saw the day ahead of us as good or bad, we knew that there was a particular routine in front of us. Now we are in new routines in which going to the store is not an absent-minded act anymore. Before I walk out of my apartment to do anything, I put on my face mask, grab a pair of rubber gloves and make sure I have hand sanitizer. I also find that in addition to putting on a face mask and disposable gloves, I'm wearing fear. It's not an accessory I like having with me.

The first week of April 2020 was a turning point for me. My consciousness rippled out a little further from my personal shore of comfort and it shook me. On one hand I was safe in my apartment, which I call my "earth haven." My apartment marked my financial independence and is the first home I've put time, energy, money and love into, in a way that only I could. It's also where I've longed to be for more than a year due to being away for work. A pandemic is far from what I thought would bring me home and yet, I am so utterly grateful to be here. I am financially secure, even though I have no idea when I'll return to

work. I'm in good health and mostly in good spirits, depending on the day. On the other hand, as I watch the news each day, I see how widely this virus is infecting and affecting so many of us in ways that extend far beyond our health. At times, it has made my spirit weary. My spirit is weary for my friends that have no idea how they will be able to pay their bills. Weary for my friends who are actors that are seeing months of income, healthcare, insurance and artistic expression being wiped off the calendar with every passing week, in a career that is already fragile by nature. I'm also weary for every life that has and will be lost because of this powerful and indiscriminate virus. I'm weary for the various service providers that make the conscious decision to jeopardize not just their own health but also, the health of their loved ones, every time they go to work.

Something I am re-discovering for myself during this time of isolation and introspection is that I can function in more than one state of emotion at a time. Even with my best attempts to limit the weight of fear I feel each day, there are days when my ability to keep fear at a distance doesn't work. I started working on this book under the unavoidable weight of fear. As I've worked on it, love becomes more present. I think that's because I'm allowing myself to *embrace* where I am. I use the word "embrace" in a very conscious way. I am not resigned or surrendering from a place of hopelessness; it's quite the opposite. By embracing my ever-changing emotional state, without judgement, I am, in fact, responding from a place of love. There are many ways to embrace fear in a way that will keep you physically and emotionally healthy. It all starts with recognizing when fear is present. I've sat alone in my apartment crying or I've put music on and danced alone. I've taken a drive two hours out of New York City with my boyfriend, and I've also spent a full day watching television from the comfort of my bed. Fear needs as much space, attention and nurturing as love does, and my experience has shown me that when I allow fear the space it needs, love follows closely behind.

Is fear pulling at you, asking to be seen, heard or felt? If your answer

is yes, how are you embracing it? If your answer is no, is there a way you could embrace it? There is no wrong answer to these questions, only an opportunity for us to find a deeper connection with ourselves. I had a lengthy relationship with fear that would put Lady Gaga's bad romance to shame! But fear can be a friend...kind of like that messy, lovable friend that has bad manners but good intentions and infectious laughter. Befriending fear requires a full emotional excavation and knowing what, of your emotional palette, to let go of. Letting go is not easy by any means; however, it is possible.

We all have our own emotional history that has shaped how we see the world and certain situations in our lives. This may sound radical (as if living through a pandemic isn't radical!), but I would like to encourage you to let go of that history. Emotional history is outdated and limited because we are not the same people today that we were then. Through learning of my story, you will see that I'm an expert on this. At that time in the past, we were working from a different skill set emotionally and unless we have chosen to stunt our emotional growth, we continue to have a wider, accessible emotional skill set to work from. I'm not saying that it isn't helpful to learn from our emotional pasts. We just don't have to live today as if it were the same as five, twenty or forty years ago. And if it is the same, why are we choosing to keep it the same?

I would like to show you what it's like to Become Magic. I invite you to be a personal champion for yourself. I'm not asking you to emulate and replicate. I would like for you to be inspired to draw from my story for yourself. A "Path of Personal Reconstruction" is not only a statement that I am declaring here; it's also a query for you.

CHAPTER 1

Six Men, Five Cities

*"Pride, envy, avarice—the sparks that have
set on fire the hearts of all men."*

—DANTE ALIGHIERI

I WAS BORN Antuan Raimone Budgett. Once I decided on a career in theatre, I started thinking about what my professional name would be. "Budgett" seemed sharp and short. I decided to go with Antuan Raimone for my professional name in 1998. Then in 2007, Magic was given to me.

In 2007, I was hired as the vacation swing for the Off-Broadway production of *In the Heights*, working with the two dance captains, Michael Balderrama ("Baldy") and Stephanie Klemons. Baldy was teaching me the show. I have an insane ability to watch choreography and pick up the details and nuances very quickly. I always had an ability for memory and spatial awareness and assumed that other people did. I could probably tell you exactly how far my closet is from where I am standing. That also comes with my habitual pattern of putting everything back to where I retrieved it from. Everything has its place and there will never be a question where it is. As Baldy taught the show, he would teach me something and I would get it and ask, "What's next?"

We were scheduled for a four-hour rehearsal once, but it ended up being an hour because there was an emergency at the theatre, and he was needed. Next day, when I came in, he asked me to show him what I could remember from the night before, and it was the whole teaching despite our squeezed time. When cast members would ask him how the new guy was, he said, splendid. “He picks it up just like that. Like magic!” He has called me that ever since. It took some time, but I would eventually embrace the name, putting me into a kind of questionable spotlight for a calm and unassuming guy. To get that kind of nickname from Baldy, whose career includes productions like Michael Jackson’s *Ghost*, *In the Heights*, *Hot Feet*, *Movin’ Out*, *Urban Cowboy*, and *Saturday Night Fever*, and has worked with Gloria Estefan, Bruno Mars, Sutton Foster, Vanessa Williams, Brian Adams, Mariah Carey—respect!

How could I not become Magic?

J. Philip Bassett (“JB”), a stage manager on Broadway for more than two decades, can vouch for me: “He learned tracks as a swing faster than anybody I’ve known. He could understand something in the first pass and all-consuming and manifest it like nobody else. Magic.”

So, I started introducing myself as Magic, but I would always have this weird glitch in my intros to people. I felt arrogant saying Magic, but in the performance world, it was more acceptable. I stopped being so embarrassed about introducing myself as Magic. It was unofficially part of my professional name. And I swear, like magic, I started seeing certain instances of life as magic, too. Like dancing my ass off for a role in *Hamilton* and getting it.

JB, the original stage manager, describes the picture of what being a part of this production signified: “Everybody believed it would be a big hit. No one knew how big. I got hired in March of 2015 and tickets went on sale shortly after that. I was close to the management office. For a show to sell \$1 million makes it a massive hit, but *Hamilton* blew that out of the water. Tens of millions of dollars a day. Something that no one had experienced in that volume of ticket sales. So, what could it be compared to? *Wicked*? *Book of Mormon*? When it did that kind of

business in the first day, it indicated it would be bigger than anything including *Rent*, things that are massive. It launched into a category by itself. We didn’t know what to brace for. The only thing you could do is tuck your head, do the work. We went to work mounting the show and ultimately, you only have so many seats to sell. You don’t have more seats. Every seat, every night. Full house every night and you don’t have to ask that question. You ask this for other shows because if a show has half a house, you want to prepare your performers so if they walk out on stage and only see half full, they’re not thrown or shocked by it. We could assume a full house for as long as we ran the show.

“In the first week of previews, Barack Obama wanted to come in two days. We instantly had Secret Service in the building. We hadn’t even opened the show and were still refining it. We needed to have interviews with Secret Service, figure out a command center for the President, and have snipers on the roof! On top of everything we had to accomplish. With *Hamilton*, many of the things are already mind-blowing. So, you can revel in the bizarre world you’re in later. Let’s ‘get it done’ first. And we did, to rave reviews. We sold out for a year, so we didn’t have to deal with the logistics of performing on *Good Morning America*, *Today*, *Late Night*. That was the right decision. Then the Grammy Awards wanted a show and we said we would do it remotely. At first, they said ‘no’, and we refused so they came back. It was an indicator to how unique the show is and the kind of clout it has. The only other time they took a virtual show was Madonna in the nineties.”

Every aspect of this show had meaning. It’s even difficult for me to simply call *Hamilton* a show, because I’ve done many “shows.” *Hamilton* is more like a phenomenon.

JB recalls me breaking down in tears after the first dress rehearsal in Chicago. I was sitting in the mezzanine as a part of a family that was in their creative light and gainfully employed in the cutting edge of theatre that would be taken in by 2.6 million over the course of 2,000 performances (pre-Disney broadcasting, at that). There was something about my life that had come full circle and landed on that moment.

So much happened in such a short time. Barack Obama being dazzled by the show was one thing, but then Donald J. Trump got elected as U.S. President. The Chicago show had just opened a month before, and JB happened to be there on Election Day. It was grim, even devastating. Tommy, the director, encouraged him to remind the performers that the moment was a time for activism. The show is by itself an active revolution. The show morphed in front of his face because it was born under Barack Obama with so much joy and pride and then Trump got elected. And different lyrics, different moves occurred. I imagine it will do that forever. *Hamilton* is so all-encompassing about politics that it will change with the leader sitting in the Oval Office.

We had Broadway. We were going to open Chicago, then London. JB's strategy was to hire a bunch of performers that were "strictly *Hamilton*." In 2016, no one knew what it was unless they had seen it on Broadway. Word of mouth was it. The album had not been released so performers didn't know what they were walking into. They couldn't prepare in advance, so it became a complicated process. JB and Stephanie sat down to discuss this idea of a universal swing. Someone who could go from Broadway to Chicago or to the tour.

A male and female swing would be needed to cover the ensemble, which included five women and six men. When you add different companies, one would think each *Hamilton* would be a carbon copy of the last, but our music supervisor and choreographer didn't want to be held to that. Essentially, Man 3 in Chicago could be more of Man 2 on Broadway with a little of 4 sprinkled in, so hiring a universal swing, Broadway to Chicago, meant learning twelve different tracks that could translate from one show to the next.

He adds: "It seemed obvious that Magic was going to be one of our go-to people because of this extraordinary talent he has to do just that for this kind of role. And let alone, eighteen different tracks if we decided to put him on tour. It meant ability to adapt seamlessly and quickly so they could float amongst companies. Being a swing is challenging enough. Some people tap out after the six! Even finding a swing is a needle in the

haystack. But finding someone with Magic's ability is one in a million. Sixty percent become very good swings, but 30 percent can't keep up to speed, then another 10 or 15 percent tap out. Nobody faults anyone for that because some brains don't work like that. It's better to know before you hire someone and spend money on costumes, rehearsals, but sometimes that is not possible. Knowing we would make this kind of investment into a person, knowing Magic, made it absolute."

Who doesn't want to be known as absolute? It would be my highest honor.

You hear people say that it helps to know someone in this business (or who to sleep with!), but I don't think of this in the way that you think. I'm referring to the bond you make as a chosen family and helping to ensure each other's future in the industry.

Amber White was in her twenties when we met during *In the Heights*, where she was assistant stage manager. We became fast friends. For a stage manager, so much of the job is to collaborate with artists to figure out how to help them do their art and perform eight times a week or stay fresh. Keep the show consistent and clean and not drill down so they don't feel boxed in. They have to work collectively with everyone because ultimately, you have deadlines and schedules. Cohesion is part of the job. That's Amber's current stage manager's job description. They call the show, make sure backstage runs smoothly, and put out a schedule. Then there is the long-term management to keep a show going.

Imagine my elation to see that JB and Amber would be on the stage management team of *Hamilton*. She was also seven months pregnant in the run-up to the show. She was set to give birth the day before *Hamilton* started to rehearse. Five months after her beautiful daughter was born, she moved into production supervisor right away. We've developed a deep bond, and we often compare our personal lives with our performance lives. If you could set certain events to music, I'm sure Amber and I would come up with the best playlist!

In her words: "Magic has been able to look within and take that long-term journey of life to turn adversities inside out and use them as

a positive experience. That ability is so unique because it's hard. It's not something everyone can do. Between *Heights* and *Hamilton*, I saw him do this. A path of personal reconstruction. When he was at the point of talking about this out loud, that was a beautiful thing to see. The time that he was with us in New York, I loved hearing what he was up to. It escalated quickly with his TEDx Talk. He got noticed and that encourages you to continue. He's still quiet and calculated, but you can tell that calculation is about bringing something out. What he does as a performer is similar to who he is as a person. He takes the information, and something is happening, then you just have a performance."

They also hired the extremely gifted Eliza Ohman, who I had danced alongside in the ensemble of *Radio City Christmas Spectacular*. We were the first universal swings that *Hamilton* hired. We call each other "Swing Star." If she says it, I agree without a second thought. That is how much I trust her. Our brains have unique wiring.

Eliza recalls of our bond: "Magic was my lifeline at *Hamilton*. Those first three months of learning the show were chaotic! I was terrified every single day, but *especially* on the first day of rehearsal. I was swinging, which I'd never done before, and on day one, my male counterpart hadn't been hired. I really felt like I was going it alone. The next day, I sat in my seat feeling completely isolated from the company and saw Magic's name on the binder next to mine. Everything felt safer. My male counterpart was Magic. A ray of sunshine, the person that demonstrated to me the value of using my voice (which I definitely needed those first few months), and someone who'd done this before. Whenever we rehearsed the show with the other swings, Magic was my partner. I learned the show with his body and his energy. We didn't get a chance to partner together onstage for almost a year. By that point, I'd partnered with almost a dozen of the men in the company but sharing the stage with him felt like home. For the first time I felt like I was performing the show I learned, not because my other partners hadn't been great, but they weren't my first introduction to the world."

What a world!

It is a world I would navigate for three years. My job is to know everything that the male ensemble/chorus has to do in the show...for five different companies. To be more specific, I have to know the differences in choreography, vocal parts, blocking, set moves, prop moves and costume changes for SIX MEN IN FIVE DIFFERENT CITIES. Imagine if you had to know every detail for six of your coworkers and you could be asked to do someone else's job at a moment's notice. Sounds impossible, maybe even ridiculous and it's been my every day for three years. And I love it! It keeps the show fresh for me because I get to see it from a different angle each time that I'm on stage and my body gets a rest by not having to perform every night. It also means that I can be away from home for weeks, and as the case was in 2019, months, at a time.

I confess, I engaged in a lot of conversations with dear friends and colleagues in order to help me put the pieces of my life together for your reading pleasure. But it is hard to express just how pinpoint-accurate others' views and recollections of me are. It is shocking and affirming to hear about snippets of your life. It also shows the totality and power of perception and empathy. Humanity. They relayed my life, the whole tapestry of agony and ecstasy, far better than I could alone. Particularly my maturity from silence to my own version of loudness.

Swing Star says of a very pivotal part of my life in 2014 when we had met in *Radio City Christmas Spectacular*. "Throughout the rehearsal process I was so grateful to him because as someone only a year into my career, I didn't always feel empowered to use my voice, but Antuan set the example that asking questions, saying what you need, and advocating for yourself is the only way forward professionally. That mindset may not work in all spaces, but if it doesn't, I know now those aren't my spaces! Since meeting Antuan I've watched him grow most significantly in his emotional health. When we met, he was processing his father's passing and still processing a lot of shame he carried with him since he was a young boy. Each year, I watched him grow more certain that other people's narratives about him had no bearing over the life he'd choose to lead. Societal conformity that didn't serve him would no longer define him or influence him."

CHAPTER 2

Growing Up with Shadow Figures

*“If you know the enemy and know yourself you need
not fear the results of a hundred battles.”*

—SUN TZU

I ALWAYS LOVED to dance when I was a kid and sang in my church choir, first as an alto and then a tenor. At any kind of family event, I could be found dancing. I was naturally flexible and could do center, left and right splits without thinking about it. I would watch music videos and learn the choreography by watching it over and over again. In high school, my alarm clock was the radio. In sum, I listened to—and lived—music nonstop.

I am from Blue Springs, Missouri, about twenty-five minutes east of Kansas City and over four hours from Ferguson. When I was a kid, the population was between 17,000 and 21,000. According to my mother, I was easier to raise compared to my two older, more vocal sisters. I didn't like being punished so it didn't take much to keep me in line.

Our mother was a single mom for the most part, a sole provider while my father gave her grief, so Rhonda and Robin had a lot of responsibilities when I came into their world. Rhonda was going on sixteen years old and about to set the fashion industry on fire. Back in the 1960s, if you saw an African American man in Macy's and JC Penney's catalogs and Hallmark cards, that was my sisters' dad as the first. Hallmark Cards needed children and they didn't have any African American children, so they asked him if Rhonda and Robin could be a part of the brand and do Easter and Christmas cards. My sisters became the first African American children to be on a Hallmark card. In doing that, it was an instant talent, particularly for Rhonda. She also played the piano and clarinet and sang in the choir. An introvert by nature, Rhonda enrolled in a talent agency's class for confidence. She wanted to get into broadcasting. The scout pushed her to become a model.

As if being the ethnic face of Hallmark weren't bold enough, Rhonda was the first African American student to go to Europe to do couture and prêt-à-porter modeling for commercials and catalogs. Then she entered AFTC, where talent from around the world was scouted by agents and producers. And here is where the road to fame got windy for Rhonda. They were doing a swimsuit contest and they wanted her to change, but she was very shy, and she never believed in showing her body, at least publicly. This woman cajoled her friend to take Rhonda upstairs to get dressed. She was crying! By the time she changed and got back downstairs, they were getting ready to call her name—to walk in front of 2,000 people. Well, my big sis got through the whole event and at the gala, they announced awards. She had won “overall model” for her division among several awards. That night changed Rhonda's life. This scout saw something in her that she didn't know she had, which propelled her career. Three weeks later, at a fashion show, an agent asked Rhonda if she was ready to move to Paris to start her career. Blue Springs to Paris! She paved the way, announcing to her siblings that there was no limit.

In the meantime, Robin took care of me the best she could. She was thrilled to have a baby brother and showed it every chance she got.

When she hung out with friends, I was still sitting in a stroller at her hip. I remember one summer day, them hanging out and me getting in the stroller. She pushed me while she talked to her friend. I love that memory. Robin gave me a Betty Boop T-shirt that she couldn't wear anymore and I'm not ashamed to share that I obsessively started to collect Betty paraphernalia because of that connection with Robin. She didn't hit the runway, but she is immensely talented, too. She may regret not getting into entertainment because she would have been a success. However, she retired as a chief in the U.S. Navy and has gone on to get her bachelor's degree, in addition to being a mother of five remarkable women.

My mother raised us all with music around the house but had no clue about the business of entertainment or what opportunities lurked for us. She worked very hard, holding sometimes two or three jobs, and she pressed us to have good grades. That was the basic criteria repeated over and over in the household. As I got old enough to understand the game, I observed the systems that Rhonda and Robin created in order to get what they wanted from Mom. I learned a thing or two.

Rhonda explains, "I learned to have a plan before talking to her. If I wanted something to happen, I needed to have a full explanation first. We all needed to have this approach. All she had to do was sit and wait for our results! My dad understood fashion and entertainment. My mom went through a lot with Antuan's father. She was very controlling, which meant she was out of control sometimes. God gave me the wisdom to learn how to deal with her. I told my siblings that we always had to honor our parents and we would live a long life. I've always had a connection with God. We don't get to pick our parents."

My sisters went to these faraway places and my mother was supportive of it. Because I had that blueprint from them, it made it easier for me to leave home, go to college, travel on cruise ships, and move to New York. I had this innate feeling that Mom would be okay if I did anything even close to this.

Much of my childhood existed with my father out of that picture.

In my memory, I can only recall us living together as a family for maybe four years of my childhood. For a long time, I was mad at my dad for not being there and even went so far as to not care if he was or not; I became indifferent about it. I have a close friend that says indifference is worse than hate or anger because with hate or anger you have at least connected an emotion to that person.

Over the years, I have learned to forgive my father. What I now know is that my dad, whom I call "Daddy-O," was doing the best he knew how to do when he knew it. He would grow exponentially over the years, and so have I. We grew individually and also together as father and son. He missed so many birthdays and performances, either because I didn't invite him, or he just didn't come to them. He didn't teach me to shave, tie a tie, or even how to drive. The most important thing he did, however, was tell me he loved me and was proud of me every time I talked to him. He was also an affectionate man, hugging me whenever we got together; such important elements of our relationship I will always remember.

His absence when I was a child certainly contributed to my loneliness and sense of never fitting in as a child.

I was very aware of other people's moods. That came from me being aware of my mother's mood at home. It was a regular occurrence for her to be frustrated with work, with my father and their relationship. Somewhere along the way, I became a very observant kid. I needed to know how I fit in. How do I not make things worse? I started learning how to insert myself in social situations like this. Waiting to see what a group wanted to do or how they acted. Because of this, I didn't develop my own voice as a kid.

The best thing that happened to me as a child was meeting the pretty, vivacious and best bubblegum-smackin' Danica ("Sis") at six years old, and maybe within a few minutes, we were each other's first boyfriend and girlfriend. We were two of the only children of color at our school, so we connected on numerous levels. Four months into the school year, my buddy moved away. We kept in touch as much as