

# Ken Rochon, Jr.

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## Amplifying Hope through a Legacy of Smiles

When Ken Rochon Jr. moved from a small Midwestern town to Maryland as a teenager, he was unsure of what he wanted to do with his life. Being so close to the Nation's capital, he could smell success in the air immediately. "When I moved to Maryland, I had never felt so much opportunity in my life," Ken recalls. "I had just come from a place where there's no such thing as entrepreneurialism unless you count doing a paper route. I was working my butt off detasseling corn every summer, de-weeding the bean fields, and shoveling snow from driveways. All the jobs I had were manual labor. When I got here, I immediately saw an opportunity! You can do anything here and make a living."

Ken was only 17 at the time, but he had found not one but two successful businesses within the year. One was an entertainment company, and the other was a design company. Today, the former is known as Absolute Entertainment and the latter Perfect Publishing. They are both 37 years old and still thriving.

Few teenagers would have the wherewithal to build two profitable businesses from the ground up, but Ken had a natural talent for making connections and selling his talents to customers. His father taught him that a good name is everything- in life and in business, and Ken quickly built a reputation for providing only the highest quality services. "Absolute had an average five-star rating," explains Ken. "As a result, we charged almost \$1,000 more for a DJ for a wedding than anyone else in the area. Then we put that money back into customer service. By 2002, we were doing about 1,400 big weddings a year. We were the second largest DJ service in the entire region with 23 high-end accounts."

As big as the business got, Ken almost lost everything when an embezzlement scheme was

uncovered. An employee at Absolute Entertainment had, over five years, stolen over \$150,000. DJ work is seasonal, and the theft was discovered shortly before a hefty tax bill was due. Ken was shocked, but as he began to take steps to right the ship, nine of his 11 DJs left. They started competing companies of their own, and the financial situation looked bleaker than ever.

"They thought the business was going to fail and didn't see any path for recovery," Ken reflects. "But I had two people who had been with me for 20 years and were willing to stay with me as I took steps to rebuild the company. It took three years, but we rebuilt it into the company we were before. Then I went on my very first vacation!"

Ken doesn't believe in quitting, and he's quick to attribute his attitude to another of his dad's lessons. It's clear he profoundly admires his father, with whom he's become even closer as an adult. "Playing baseball at age 12, I was assigned

the catcher position, which I hated," laughs Ken. "When I told my dad I was quitting, he told me he'd never sign me up for anything else again in my life! That hit me like a ton of bricks. I never quit again, and I never quit another thing for the rest of my life."

Today, Ken is CEO of the Umbrella Syndicate and Co-founder of The Keep Smiling Movement, an international nonprofit mental and dental health organization. Both forge connections between people all over the world. The Umbrella Syndicate, founded in 2010, is a marketing and PR organization that amplifies good businesses and good causes. Through a lifetime of prioritizing relationship building and networking, Ken maintains a vast Rolodex of connections to help get the word out about exciting new ventures. Umbrella Syndicate now boasts thousands of connections, including business owners, writers,



influencers, musicians, speakers, models and more.

True to form, Ken did not focus first on monetizing the Syndicate; he still had his successful entertainment business supporting him financially, and he knew that step one was building a rock-solid reputation. Instead, he began by offering his services to prominent clients in exchange for sponsorships. "I volunteered," he describes. "I would find the biggest events on social media and let them know I had a large platform and could get them exposure. All I asked in return was to be listed as a senior sponsor. They would look at my page and could see it was blowing up. I was getting 35,000 visitors a week, and they could see the potential exposure they would get. I did events at the White House and worked with the Ravens and Redskins. None of it was bringing in money yet, but it was bringing massive prestige. That became the door opener."

With little income flowing into the Syndicate at its start, Ken was able to use the work he'd done for movers and shakers to attract clients. Seeing the work he'd completed to date; Ken began to get offers for paid work. "I went through lots of years of looking at deplorable income statements, but in the market, I looked like a millionaire," laughs Ken. "People thought I was a millionaire! I'm next to all these big companies, proving that I'm worth \$5,000 to \$10,000 a day, or \$2,500 per hour in some cases. Umbrella Syndicate wasn't started to be impressive financially; it was a relationship collateral investment portfolio."

Ken loved to ask his clients to name the most inspiring person they knew and then connect with that person. Along the way, he was always looking for purpose. "Every day, I was praying, not to make money, but to know what I'm supposed to be doing with my life," says Ken. "It took seven years, and then this 65-year-old Jewish man hands me a card that said, 'Keep Smiling.' I couldn't stop thinking about this card and what I could do with it. I talked to him that weekend and asked if I could turn it into a global movement. He said, 'OK.' That surprised me. I thought he would think I was crazy."

The man's name was Barry Shore, and for years he'd been on a simple mission—to keep people smiling. Since 1999, he'd been carrying "Keep Smiling" cards and handing them out to everyone he met. Ken loved the card and immediately saw the potential of The Keep

Smiling Movement. "There's nothing more welcoming than a smile, no matter what language you speak," observes Ken. "This was God's gift to me, to have an impact on people this way. My son loves giving cards to people; you give the card to people, and they shift mentally. We call it 'shift happens.' Give the cards out, and you'll see how people change, how they're happier. Barry knew how powerful it was, he'd printed them in about 20 languages, and now we're up to 25. I'd like to have them in every major language."

Barry's work and life have been a major inspiration to Ken. Barry, a sufferer of Guillain-Barré syndrome, a disease that attacks one's central nervous system, woke up one day at 55, completely paralyzed. "He is a bit of a miracle because only about one in 10,000 people can get some mobility afterward," explains Ken. "Barry swims two miles a day. He attributes it to his attitude and mindset. His Rabbi gave him the 'keep smiling' card when Barry was struggling mentally and physically. He walks with a staff today, but he's mobile. He gets in the water swims two miles. Tracking his miles, he will tell you that he's swum from Australia to Los Angeles by now."

In the years between his injury and meeting Ken, Barry had handed out about a million cards. In less than five years, The Keep Smiling Movement has more than doubled with the loyal support of Dr. Andrea Adams-Miller, the Executive Director. "She turned my passion into a 501(c)3 nonprofit that 'Saves Lives with S.M.I.L.E.S by Creating a D.O.S.E. of H.O.P.E,'" Ken shares. "It opens countless opportunities to connect with others, sometimes personally and often professionally. The cards create smiles that invoke conversations. These conversations become motivational stories worthy of our Legacy book as they inspire readers that all is possible. These smiles, cards, conversations and books save lives, inspire hope and build a legacy. And abundance is created as a bonus."

Ken's father was undoubtedly a major influence growing up, but he credits his belated mother with his passion for a positive attitude. She always emphasized the importance of looking on the bright side of every situation. Ken's father was in the military, and the family rarely stayed in one place for more than a year or two. In fact, by the time Ken was 12, his father had been stationed in 13 different locations. The moves were rough on Ken, and often Ken would sabotage his friendships

and leave his friends on bad terms when he learned they were moving. "My mother showed me the silver linings," Ken reflects. "She taught me that if you look for a problem with someone, you're going to find it. But if you look for the good in people, you always find it, too. My mom taught me how to believe in myself and other people."

Born in Rhode Island, Ken lived in Paris for two months and later in Hong Kong. When Ken's father was stationed in Vietnam, Ken and his mother moved to India to live in his paternal grandfather's home. His first memories are of New Delhi, where his grandfather taught agriculture throughout his career. He was the only white student at his school, but he recalls that he was easily accepted and never bullied. He learned to love Indian food, which he professes he could eat every day. He heard from his father in Vietnam via tape recordings sent in the mail.

The family's next stop was Germany, but in Germany, they moved between five different bases. "When I found out we were moving again, I'd just turn into the biggest jerk ever," remembers Ken. "I destroyed friendships and picked big fights. It was my way of not dealing with the pain of losing them. But my mom intervened when she saw what was happening. She taught me there was never a good reason to be negative. She always found a way to be happy."

After Germany, the family relocated to the US in a small town in Illinois. This area is where Ken spent the rest of his middle school and high school years. The adjustment to the US was huge. In Europe, Ken had, like most kids, been fascinated by soccer. He thrived on the field and excelled at the sport, but in America in the 1970s, soccer just wasn't an option. "Back in Germany, I thought I was going to be a professional soccer player," smiles Ken. "I was like a junior Pelé. I was 12 years old, playing with high school kids. I was an all-star soccer player. And then we moved."

Without soccer or any of his childhood friends, Ken spiraled into depression. It was hard adjusting to America despite the fact it was his native country. For one thing, the racism in Illinois shocked him. There was a black and white side of town, and Ken was called names for being kind to all the other kids, no matter their race. Some of the students teased him for being from Germany for coming from a foreign culture.

Finally, a friend of Ken's dad suggested that he try out for the cross country and thought

that perhaps running would be a positive athletic outlet. "I hated life without soccer, and I was about two years into my depression," recalls Ken. "In my first 5k race, I killed it. I was in contention the entire race and was running with the top athletes. The high school coach was there and invited me to try out. In the 9th grade, I qualified for a spot at the state competition. I ended up being offered Captain of the Track team, Captain of Cross Country, and Captain of Indoor Track. And then my dad gets another assignment in Maryland."

His prowess at running was so sought after, all of Ken's coaches offered to let him live with them. They wanted him to remain in Illinois and complete his high school running career. Ken was also an accomplished artist and had already been awarded two art scholarships to Illinois State University. His art teacher also extended a similar invitation. But Ken knew that as important as his community had become to him, his family was more important. "I was 17, and I had to reinvent myself yet again," Ken remembers. "It was hard. But I didn't sabotage relationships this time, and I was committed to earning in Maryland what I lost in Illinois. It was the first time I had something to prove—prove that I could do it again."

Ken earned two small cash art grants to study Medical Illustration at Anne Arundel Community College. The degree was a mixture of art and science; Ken realized it was a way to earn money while embracing his love of art. "I had a love of anatomy," says Ken. "I was studying Leonardo da Vinci's anatomy drawings when I was in the second grade." His love of science, meanwhile, was spurred on by a harsh third-grade teacher, Mr. Engel. "He was strict," Ken grins. "He ran his science class like a military school. No matter how hard I worked, I couldn't get more than a C- in his class. But as demoralized as I was, when I went on to 4th, 5th, and 6th grade, I was always the top student in science all because of Mr. Engel."

Despite his love for art, Ken quickly realized that medical illustration was not at all creative. He decided he wanted to make a difference, particularly to kids in his community, finishing college with a degree in education. He knew teaching paid very little, but he enjoyed influencing young minds, and he was making money with his DJ business. His teacher's salary served as a supplement rather than his only income stream. "The idea of teaching came from

my mom," Ken states. "My mom taught for 22 years before she was diagnosed with dementia."

Ken spent a few years teaching in Prince George's County before realizing that as much as he wanted to change his community for the better, the education system wasn't built for real change. "I was naïve to think I could make a difference in that system," admits Ken. "If a kid worked in my class and put forth an effort, I would give them a minimum of 70%. But the principal I worked for didn't see things the same way. His focus was to cash the check and go along to get along."

In 2005, Ken's mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and he devoted himself full-time to assisting his father with her care. It was a new dimension to the relationship between father and son. "I'm the oldest, and my younger brother and sister never gave him any trouble," describes Ken. "I probably gave him 50 times more trouble than both combined! I was rebellious, and that didn't fit well with his military background. But when my mom got sick, I was the one who dropped everything. For three years, I minimized everything else I was doing to help him. My dad and I became super close because of that situation."

After his mother passed away, Ken followed through on a lifelong dream of publishing a book. "She had always wanted to be an author, and she left without getting to do that," relates Ken. "I committed to not letting that be my story. A year after she died, I published my first book, *Becoming the Perfect Networker*."

Around the same time, Ken's future wife, Nelly, entered the picture. She was patient with Ken's devotion to his mother during her long illness, and he loved that she understood the importance of family. The couple has one son together, Kenny. "She's a rock-solid mom, wife, and homemaker," he observes. "She makes sure home is home. When I enter the door to our house, I don't bring problems or issues with me. We have rules about that. My phone gets docked, and I'm 100% present with Kenny and my wife."

Ken's commitment to family is evident in the pride he speaks about his young son's achievements. "He can be a scientist, an engineer, a leader, or anything he wants to be," Ken beams. "By age three or four, he was already doing 8th-grade problem-solving. He's learning sign language; he knows 50 flags and 50 different chemicals and their application in the world."

Ken's favorite object in the world is the self-published book he and his son worked on together, *Kenny's Favorite Jokes*. "It's the first thing we've done together," reflects Ken. "And we are going to continue building on this foundation."

As a leader, Ken describes himself as a chameleon. He's both a visionary and a team player. He stresses the importance of democratic management—empowering rather than dictating to his teams. "I don't want to micromanage," Ken says. "I was always working for someone who told me how to do things. I'd rather just tell you to get something done and let you come up with the best way to do it."

To young people joining the working world today, Ken stresses relationships above all else. Relationships are, after all, what got Ken to where he is today, which is part of his reputation. "You have to build partnerships," reflects Ken. "And you have to learn how to bet. One of the defining moments of my career has been during the pandemic. I would have had 99% lost income if I didn't know how to pivot, but since my pivot, I earned my doctorate and I've done some of my best work."

That best work included the two compilation books *HOPE is DOPE* and *D.O.S.E. of HOPE*. Two multiple book editions devised to showcase inspirational stories of resilience to give others a reason to smile. "The feedback has been a beautiful thing as we have had people say that they had given up," relates Ken. "And The Keep Smiling Movement gave them the dose of hope they needed to stay positive. That result is what I desire, a world where others are inspired and motivated to be resilient while they leave a legacy. With that, their SPH increases, their 'Smiles per Hour,' and when you increase your SPH, you're happier, healthier, and more abundant."

"Personally, I have embraced the sentiment 'We Amplify Goodness,' which you will find on the back of every keep smiling card, as my mission and purpose for a living," Ken states. "What a way to live life and tip the Happiness Index. Therefore, I challenge you to test this SPH Factor phenomenon to increase your smiles and leave a legacy towards a life you love that inspires others."

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