

# REAGAN'S JOURNEY

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*Lessons from a  
Remarkable Career*


By Margot Morrell

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Ronald Reagan graduated from Eureka College in 1932 – at the bottom of the depression.  
America's unemployment rate was 24%.





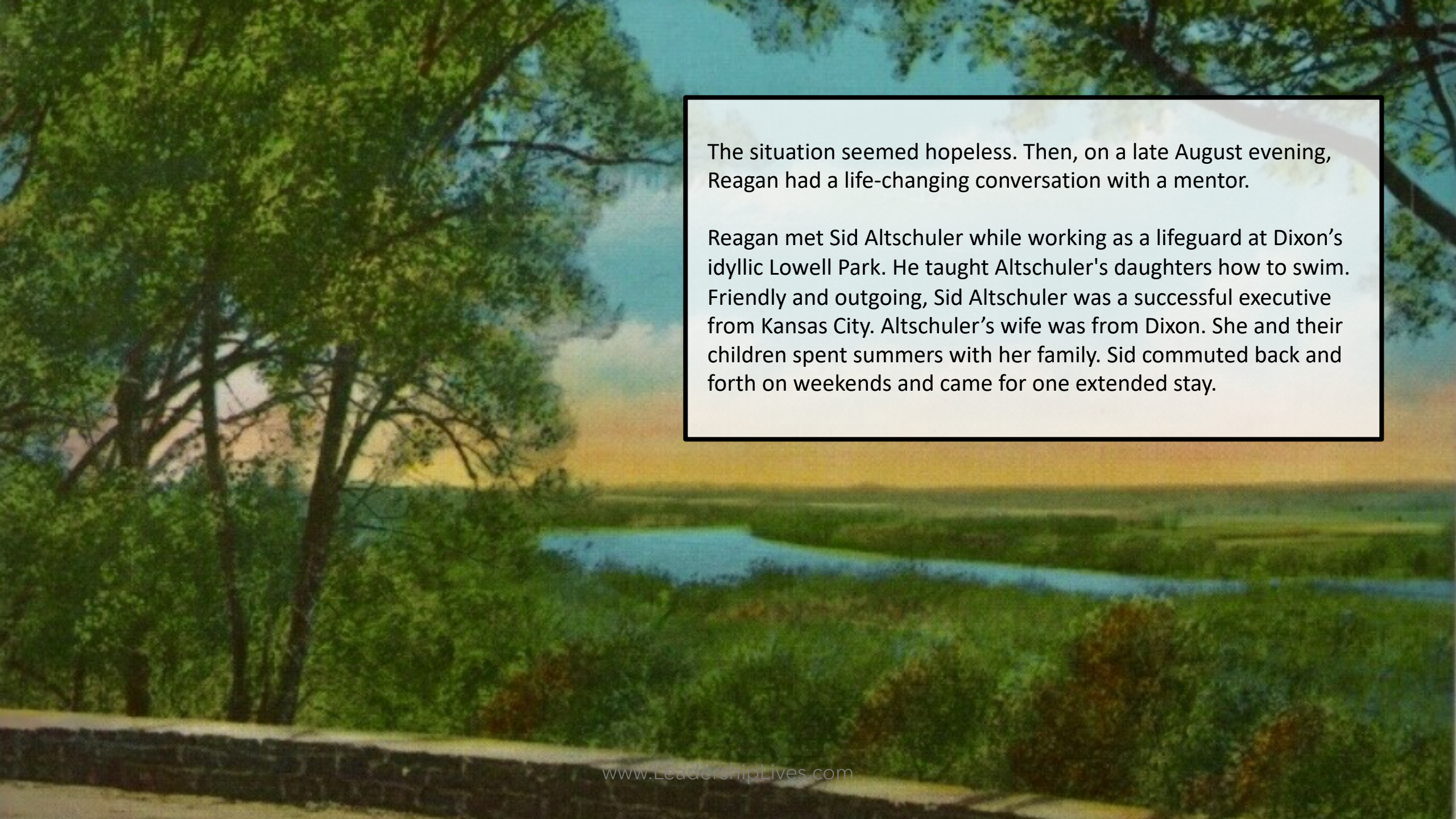
Like many young graduates, Reagan wasn't sure what he wanted to do. But he had to get a job.





He heard there was an opening for a sporting goods manager at a local store and raced over to apply. He didn't get the job.



A scenic landscape featuring a river or stream flowing through a lush green area. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. Large green trees are visible on the left side of the frame. A white box with a black border is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

The situation seemed hopeless. Then, on a late August evening, Reagan had a life-changing conversation with a mentor.

Reagan met Sid Altschuler while working as a lifeguard at Dixon's idyllic Lowell Park. He taught Altschuler's daughters how to swim. Friendly and outgoing, Sid Altschuler was a successful executive from Kansas City. Altschuler's wife was from Dixon. She and their children spent summers with her family. Sid commuted back and forth on weekends and came for one extended stay.



That evening, Sid Altschuler asked Reagan,  
“What would you like to do?”

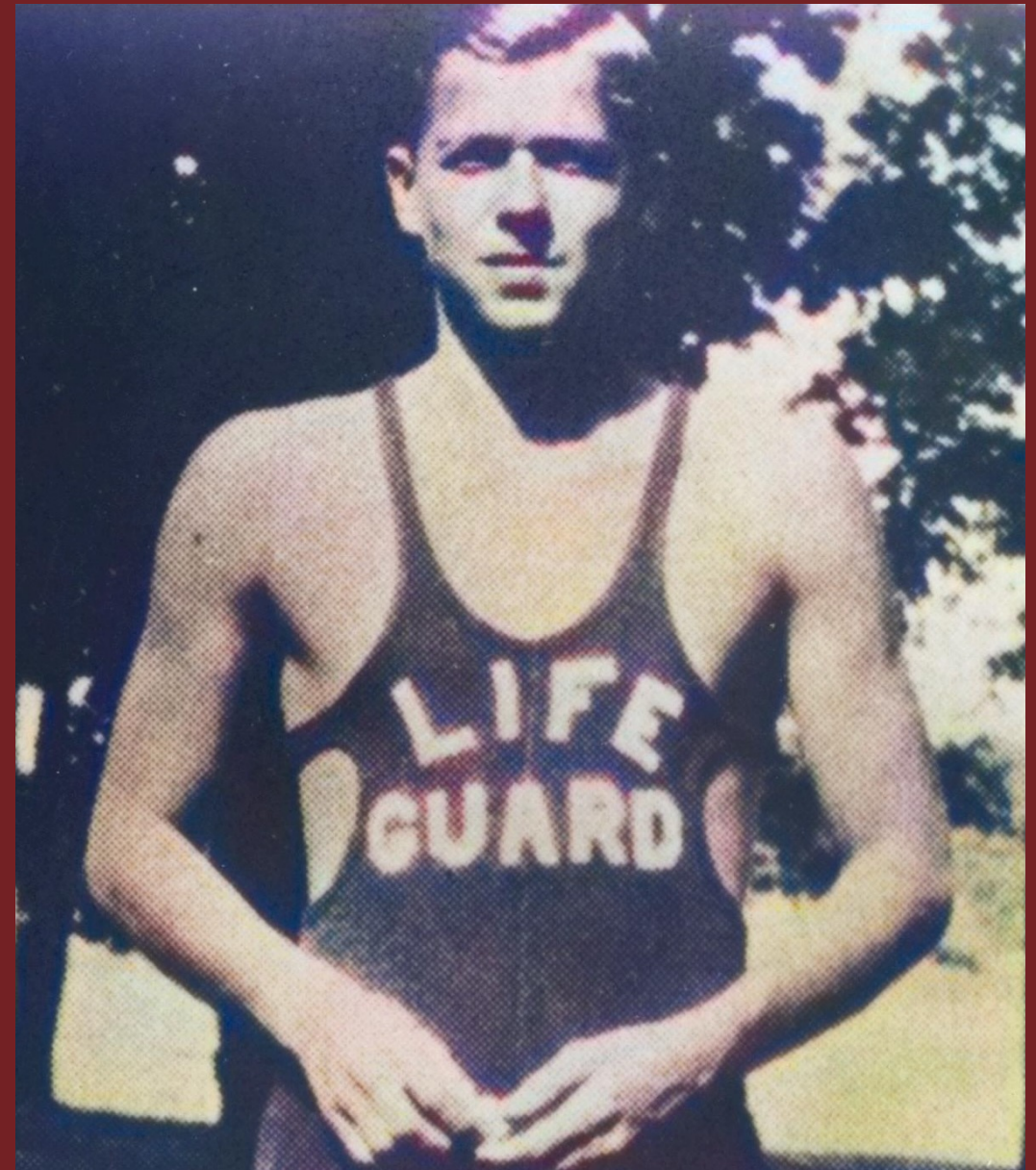
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Suddenly, Reagan saw his future in a new way.

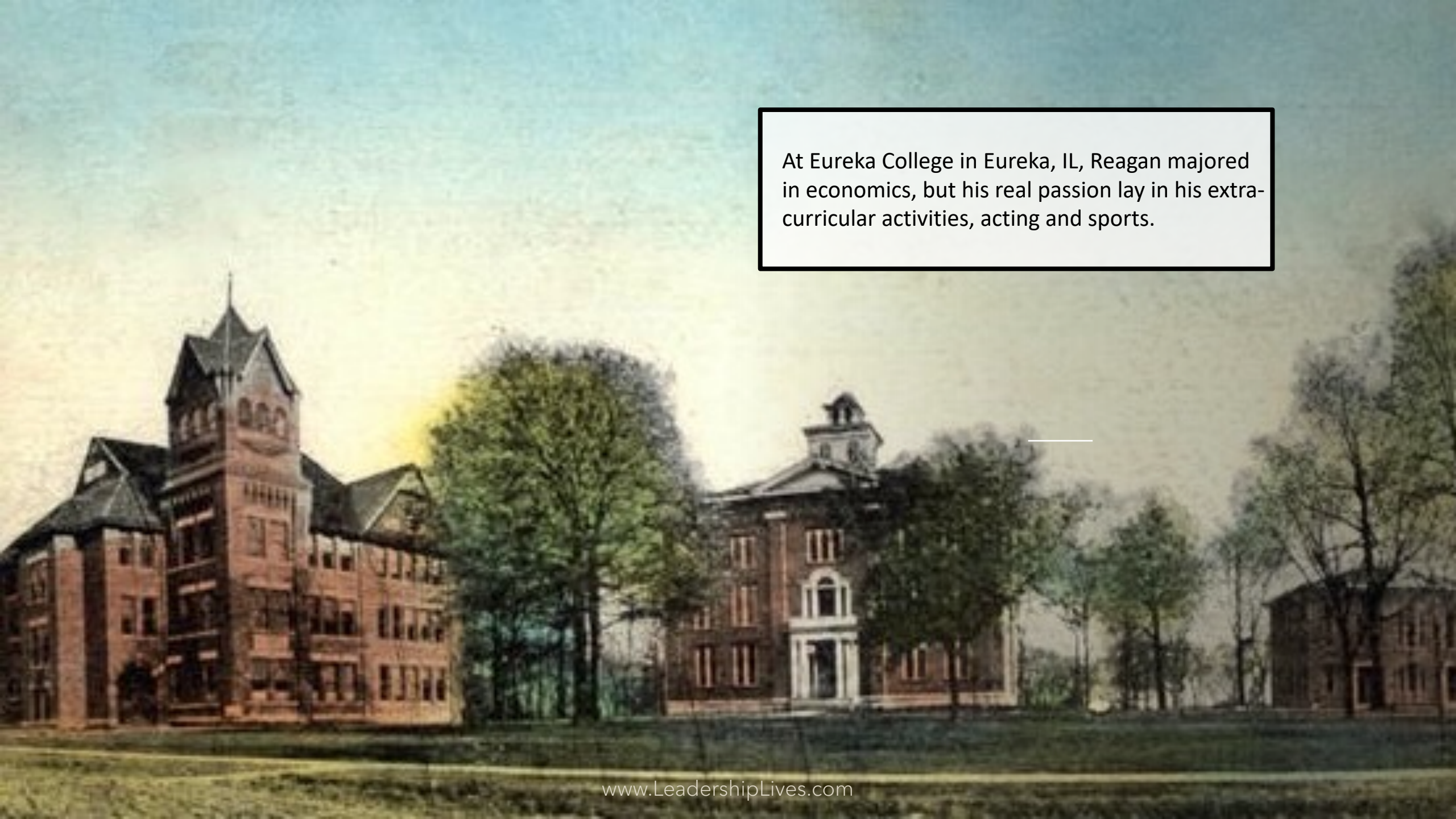
Instead of thinking about who’s hiring? Where can I get a job? He started thinking *what am I good at? What do I want to do? What will put a smile on my face when my feet hit the floor each morning?*

Before Altschuler disappeared back to Kansas City for the winter, Reagan desperately needed his advice and guidance.

So, for the next three days and nights, Reagan wrestled with the question – *What do I want to do?*







At Eureka College in Eureka, IL, Reagan majored in economics, but his real passion lay in his extracurricular activities, acting and sports.



In his junior year, Reagan won a “Best Actor Award” at a prestigious acting competition sponsored by Northwestern University’s Drama Department. Reagan beat out tough contenders from Princeton, Yale and other schools much larger than Eureka.

Before he got on the bus back to Eureka, the head of Northwestern’s Drama Department called him aside to ask if he’d given any thought to an acting career. Up to that moment he hadn’t.

To Reagan contemplating his career options in 1932, Hollywood and Broadway seemed “as inaccessible as outer space.” But, as he thought about it, there was a possibility closer to home.





At Eureka, Reagan loved to entertain his frat brothers by “broadcasting” famous football games using a broom or ice-cream cone as a microphone. He would have loved to be a great football player, but he had terrible eyesight.

He decided to pursue a career as a sportscaster. It was a close-to-home starting point for a career on Broadway or in Hollywood.

Sid Altschuler assured Reagan the economic downturn wouldn’t last forever, and he approved of the choice of radio - a “sound industry.” Altschuler told Reagan to start “knocking on doors, tell anyone who’ll listen that you believe you have a future in the business” and take any job - “sweeping floors” - just to get a foot in the door.





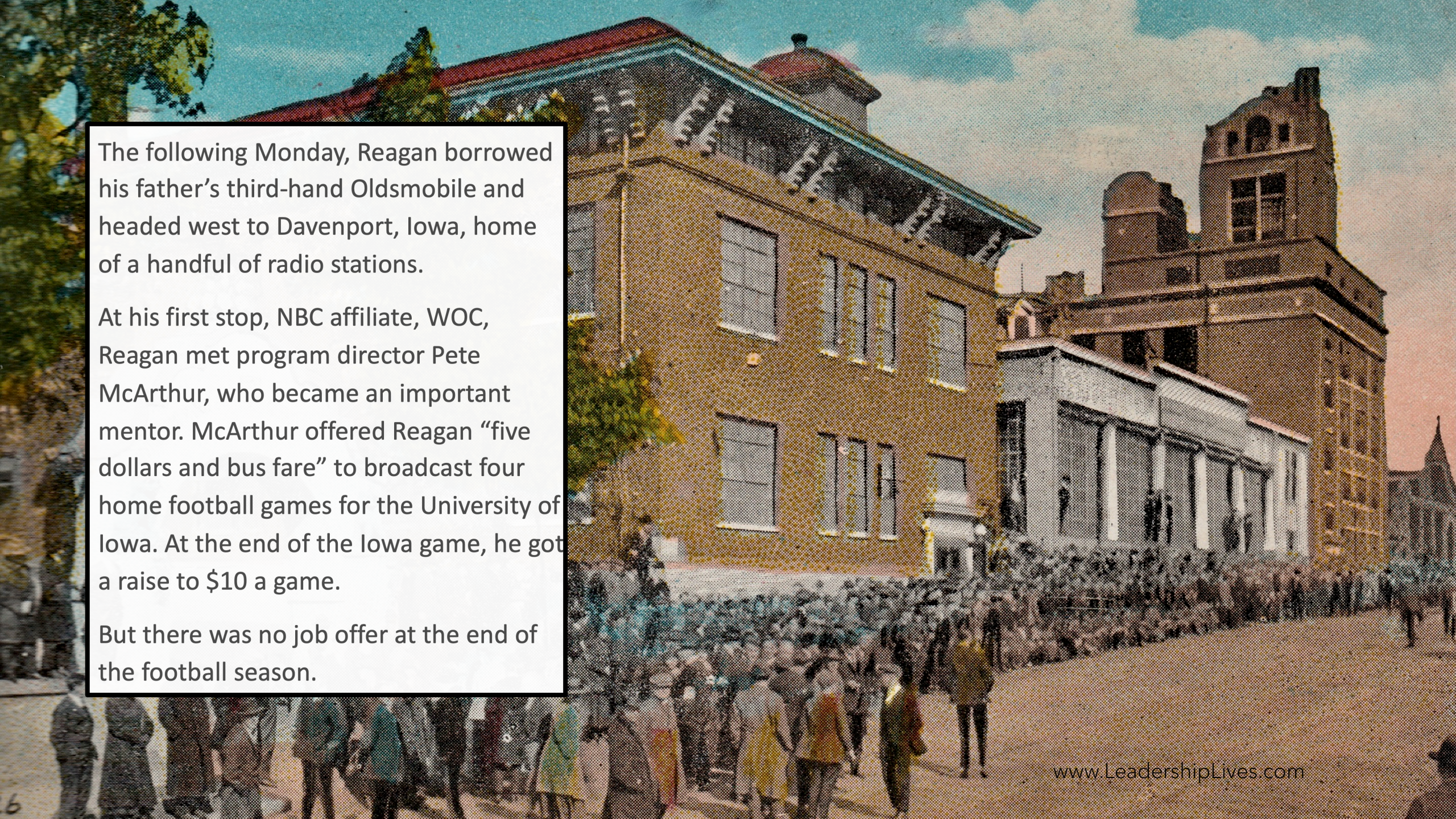


Reagan hitchhiked to Chicago, slept on a frat brother's sofa, and knocked on the door of every radio station in town.

"An angel" at WMAQ gave him some much-needed encouragement. She listened patiently and assured Reagan he had "every right to try for a place in radio."

Then, she laid out the hard facts and set him on the path to success. He was going about it all wrong, she explained, "No one in the city wants to take a chance on inexperience." He'd have a better chance of finding a job at a smaller radio station in "the sticks."





The following Monday, Reagan borrowed his father's third-hand Oldsmobile and headed west to Davenport, Iowa, home of a handful of radio stations.

At his first stop, NBC affiliate, WOC, Reagan met program director Pete McArthur, who became an important mentor. McArthur offered Reagan "five dollars and bus fare" to broadcast four home football games for the University of Iowa. At the end of the Iowa game, he got a raise to \$10 a game.

But there was no job offer at the end of the football season.



# FIRED

Reagan waited two nail-biting months. Just before Christmas, Pete MacArthur called to say, 'hang in there.' In early February, Pete called again, this time with a job offer. Reagan took the bus to Davenport early the next morning with his one suitcase. A few weeks later disaster struck. He was fired.

For Reagan, it was “the end of the world.” He wasn’t bringing the commercials to life. Advertisers were burning up the phone lines with complaints to management.

When Reagan’s replacement backed out – he wanted a contract which the station wouldn’t give him - Reagan got his job back temporarily. Reagan now knew he needed help and demanded it. Supportive conversations with friends and blistering coaching sessions with Pete helped Reagan improve his on-air delivery. It didn’t take much, and it didn’t take long. Reagan was now firmly on the path to success.





## 1 / SPORTSCASTER

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Thanks to Sid Altschuler's advice, less than a year after he graduated from Eureka during the worst economic downturn in U.S. history, Ronald Reagan was on his way to being a radio star in the "solar plexus of the country" and, beyond that, to a spectacularly successful career.

Best of all, he was doing what he was good at and what he loved doing.





Two years later, Reagan approached management with a suggestion: if the radio station would pay his expenses, he would use his vacation time to cover the Chicago Cubs' spring training on Catalina.

The knowledge he gained would pay dividends during the long baseball season. Management snapped up his offer and Reagan got a paid vacation to southern California in the depths of the Iowa winter.





Ronald Reagan before and after his Hollywood transformation.

On his third trip to Catalina, Reagan wrangled an audition with a Hollywood studio. Against all odds, he was offered a contract with Warner Bros. They liked his voice.



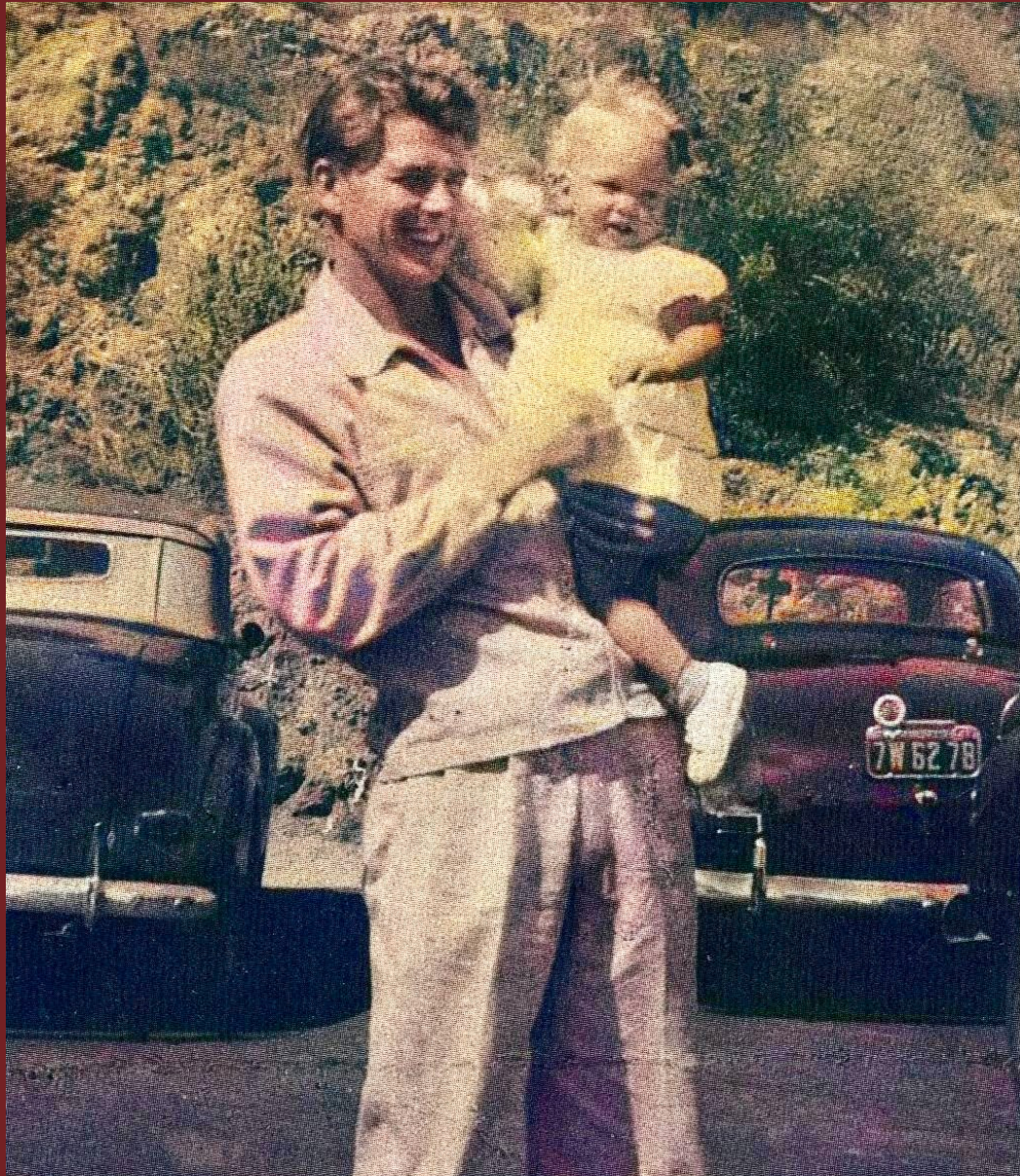


While driving to Hollywood from Iowa, Reagan daydreamed of playing George Gipp – “the Gipper” – the Notre Dame football hero who died in his senior year two weeks after throwing a 55-yard scoring touchdown in a game against Northwestern.

When Reagan heard Warner Brothers was making a movie about Notre Dame football, he raced over to the executive producer’s office to make the case that he was perfect for the part.

The Gipper was the role that made Reagan a star.





## 2 / MOVIE STAR

Over the next few years, Reagan married fellow actor Jane Wyman who he met on a movie set. They had a daughter and named her, Maureen. Their careers flourished.

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Then, at the peak of his movie career, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and Reagan was the first Hollywood star drafted into the Army. Because of his poor eyesight, he wasn't sent overseas. He served for three years making films for military training and to boost morale.

To keep his name in front of the public, he began giving speeches to church and community groups.







## 3 / UNION LEADER

After he was discharged at the end of World War II, despite some great roles, Reagan struggled to get his career back on track. He was heartbroken when his marriage to Jane Wyman failed.

In a turbulent environment, his path forward was through the Screen Actors Guild – a first-rate organization of 75,000 members with a 50-person board of directors. His fellow actors were impressed by Reagan’s ability to explain complicated issues clearly.

Elected president seven times, Reagan learned world-class negotiating skills during his years with SAG. An expertise he would use in the years ahead.





In 1952, Reagan married fellow actor, Nancy Davis who proved to be an invaluable partner in the years ahead.

Reagan's best friend and fellow SAG board member, William Holden, served as best man at their wedding.

A new-fangled contraption called television was encroaching on the movie business. Academy Award winning actors were struggling to make a living.

The Reagans appeared in ads and as guests on TV shows and occasionally snagged a movie role.





## 4 / CORPORATE AMBASSADOR

In the early days of television, America's top companies sponsored programs. The premier company, General Electric, sponsored world-class programming that varied widely from week to week. GE needed a host to provide continuity.

In 1953, GE hired Ronald Reagan to travel around America speaking to GE employees and communities and to host General Electric Theater. For eight years, it was an extraordinarily successful partnership.



## 5 / POLITICS

By the early 1950s, Democrats and Republicans were pleading with Reagan to run for office. He turned down all offers with thanks saying, “I’m a ham - always was and always will be.”

He was a registered Democrat who voted for FDR four times but in the 1950s, he got involved in the Right to Work campaign which held that “all Americans must have the right to join a union if they choose to, but none should ever be forced to affiliate with a union in order to get or keep a job.”

The connections he made in that campaign led to a new path. When he finally changed his registration to Republican in 1962 – in the middle of a speech - he joked, “I didn’t leave the party. The party left me.”





In 1963, Reagan wrote, “One does what he feels he can do best and serves where he feels he can make the greatest contribution.” He said he was trying on a number of different hats. There was one he was sure didn’t fit. That was politics.



# LESSONS FROM A REMARKABLE CAREER

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# 1 / DISCOVER YOUR TALENTS; DEVELOP YOUR STRENGTHS

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"...In college, I majored in sociology and economics. Not because I liked the subjects, but because they gave me the most time for things I really like, namely, college dramatics, football and a dive into campus politics... Point being that success for me is where the heart is."

Ronald Reagan, 1942





## 2 / FIND MENTORS; SET GOALS

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Identify people around you whose approach to life you admire. Ask their advice, listen carefully, take notes, and put their advice into action. After acting on your mentors' advice, you can go back to them to review progress, fine-tune your approach, and set new goals.

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## 3 / BRAND YOURSELF

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To develop a strong brand or image, start by getting clear on your goal. How do you want to be seen? Then set about becoming the person you want to be.

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## 4 / CREATE A NETWORK OF CONTACTS AND SUPPORTERS

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"I have found Ronald Reagan to be a kind man. He is a gentle man. To the discomfiture of those who have misread him, he is also a strong man. In defense of the values he believes in, he can be indomitable."

Earl Dunckel, General Electric





## 5 / TURNING POINTS AND TRANSITIONS

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Four times Reagan's life slammed into a brick wall. He was heartbroken by his divorce from first wife Jane Wyman; the collapse of his long-standing relationship with Warner Bros.; the termination of his eight-year association with General Electric; and a hard-fought loss to President Gerald Ford in the 1976 primary campaign. Yet after every disaster, he picked himself up and kept moving forward.



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## 6 / UNLEASH THE POWER OF YOUR TEAM

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"Ronald Reagan , to my way of thinking, was about as near as perfect a candidate as you can get, because he let people handle the mechanics of the campaign. He didn't interfere. He let people do what they did best."

Lyn Nofziger, Communications Director, 1966 - 1980





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