

# Someone Else in the World does Care

While in India at the Netraprakash Eye Camp, a Russian volunteer doctor asked Shobi, "Why are you going to Russia?" I tried many explanations about "the caring clown" and what we do. It was not only the language that made communication difficult (she spoke some English, I spoke no Russian), it was the whole concept of the clowns in a hospital. Finally out of exasperation I said, "We are just going because we know you are having a hard time and we want to say we care!" The St. Petersburg doctor gave me a big hug, the best sort of communication. Carrie Pruitt and Danny Kollaja share their experiences in Russia.

## *From "Lanky" Danny Kollaja*

In Moscow after walking up many flights of stairs and through a maze of people and halls, we were escorted to a floor where we were left to do "whatever it is you do." You see, Russian clowns do not have what we call the "caring clown." Russia has a strong tradition of clowning, but as circus and stage clowns. The bed-to-bed clowning is not known to them. They expected us to do stage performance and had either an auditorium or space arranged for a performance. Sometimes half of us would perform, the other half would go room-to-room.

In this particular hospital we spontaneously decided to have a sort of fair as the space in the TV room was not appropriate for a performance. Face painting, balloon sculpture, giveaways and more brought laughs and smiles. I walked down the hall to see if all the children were able to go to the lobby area where we were working. The first room had Shobi Dobi already at work, the next empty, the next I found a boy of about 13 or 15 years of age and extremely emaciated. Literally skin and bones.



*Above Danny with his balloon mouse*



Clowns at a Moscow Children's Cancer Hospital: top row -left to right: Bill Hart, Lanky Middle row: Lorraine Romero, Linda Hulet, Carrie Pruitt, Shobi Dobi; Front: Elizardo Romero, Beverly Houts, Stanley Tokez

## *Testing the Comfort Zone*

It would have been nice to know his medical situation, but that was not possible. The nurse didn't understand a thing I said or asked, and I did not speak Russian. So, on I went. To test the atmosphere or "comfort zone," I began with a simple balloon sculpture. This met with a grin and definite interest. So the tone was set for more. I continued with close up magic. The child was surely alert and intrigued, so I helped him where possible with participating in the effect. During chameleon silks I held his hand, his mother pulled the silk from my hand. Since he could not make a fist for a sponge ball routine, I gave the mother the LOOK. She held out her hand and we proceeded. The child and mother became part of what was happening instead of what happens at hospitals -- things happen to you. Using a change bag, the young boy and I did magic for his mother. Of course he didn't know how he did it, but that doesn't matter. He and his mom were smiling, obviously they forgot the medical situation that had befallen them. I ended with more balloon sculpture hats, decorating both their heads. To conclude, I made a "flying mouse." I helped him fly it (pictured below) and showed the mother. A nurse entered the room clearly communicating it was time for him to go. As I left, you could see mom and son smiling at one another as they flew the mouse back and forth. The nurse was doing her best to carry (yes, I said carry) the boy to whatever procedure awaited him.

Well it was time to return to the rest of the group as we left children and staff with smiles giggles and a sense that someone else in the world does care!

*From Kooki, The Clown - Carrie Pruitt*

It was our last night in Moscow, we had just visited an institution for developmentally disabled children and an elementary school. We were exhausted, but looking forward to going to a children's leukemia hospital. When we arrived, they refused us because there had been a death on the ward we were to visit. They said the children were not in the mood for clowns. We were all shocked a bit, because this is when we were needed the most. We were, however, given the opportunity to visit an orphanage ward in the same hospital with about nine children.

The children all wanted attention: some wanted to be held, some wanted a hug, most wanted the balloon animals and toys that we offered. We all seemed to get attached to one or another of the children. There was one little girl about nine years old, her name was Lana. She was most taken by me and wanted to be with me the whole time. She was so sweet and I could feel the fever in her tiny body from the disease that overcame her. I could never imagine being terminally ill and being all alone in the world. She was an orphan, and I am a mother, not her mother, but I felt this little girl's need to be mothered. She gave me a picture that she drew and colored herself. She asked for my phone number, and I explained to her that I lived in the United States and it would be difficult to call me on the phone. We exchanged addresses and I hope that she will be able to write me. I felt her pain in me as I left the floor.

Then I remembered that I had taken my Polaroid camera on the bus. I had our photographer Betz take one photo for me (above right) and one for her. As I think of her now, she will remain in my heart forever. I think and pray for her often. In her best broken English she said that she wanted to come to the United States someday and visit me. I hope she does. I feel that I made a difference in Lana's life. She has a picture of me and I definitely got what I wanted from her -- her smile.

*Kooki and Lana in Moscow*



### ***Kooki in the USA at Children's Hospital of Orange County***

**- - Carrie Pruitt**

Kooki is an official clown for Children's Hospital of Orange County (CHOC) California. Carrie says "I let the kids know they can call me anytime. They will call sometimes between 9 p.m. and midnight, after their parents have left." She invites parents to call her too, when they need someone to talk with beside a doctor or spouse during a difficult time..

"My purpose in life is to brighten somebody's day," says Carrie. "It's hard to see so many children die. I've had seven little people die in about three months, but I've gotten over it. I just pray to the Lord."

"It is not uncommon for me to attend the funeral as a clown. I ask the parents, of course, and often they say, 'That's how they remember you,' referring to the surviving young siblings who need comfort from their friend, *Kooki the Clown.*"

"There was one funeral that made a really big impact on me. I went dressed as a clown and sat in the very back of the chapel minding my own business. A seven-year-old girl had died and her four-year-old sister was screaming her head off. She didn't want her sister to go to heaven. Then she saw me and said, 'Oh, I'm so glad you're here, Kooki!' I calmed her down for the rest of the day." Kooki gave the girl some bubbles to blow in the cemetery. "She would have been in hysterics the whole day, had I not made an appearance."