

# Hospital Clown Newsletter

A Publication for Clowns In Community and World Service

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## The Prescott Clowns

From Prescott Elementary School  
Oakland, California

This energetic group of clowns is directed in an after school program by Aileen Moffitt, a second grade teacher, aka "Irma La Clown." These children receive training in circus skills from professionals, then dazzle everyone with their juggling, unicycle riding, and dancing. They give back to their community tenfold with workshops in classrooms and performances at many community events, nursing homes, and shelters -- besides a long list of school assemblies.

"Wherever we perform -- from lavish banquet receptions to small neighborhood events -- it is our intention to dispel negative myths about the children of West Oakland. And we do!" These children sometimes labeled "at risk," become "at promise" behind a red nose.



On the cover: *The 1998 Senior Prescott Clowns*

Photos by: **Betty McAfee**, except where indicated.

Clown Makeup by: *the Clowns themselves*

Clockwise from the top left: Jacori "Orangey Orange" Lee; Tashika "Lifesaver" Boston; Brandon "YoYo" Swain; Angelina "Slinky" Johnson; Robert "CiMore" Gaines; Jerome "Feather" Martin; Alexis "Roller Coaster" Meredith; Eric "E.T." Yanez; Dominique "Sunny" Simmons; Aracely "Rosey" Rodriques; Angelic "Cherry Nose" Brown; Jessica "Polar Bear" Bennett; Shamika "Genie" Bell; Olajuwon "Bogus" Bell.



**Aileen Moffitt, "Irma La Clown,"  
Director of The Prescott Clown Troupe**

Aileen is the first to tell you that it is her full time job that supports her commitment. Although they do get some performance fees and some grant funding, she still gives much of her time on a voluntary basis.

"If you really want to set up a program like this, anyone can. I am not particularly talented in circus ways. I just have the motivation to help the kids. Anyone who wants to start a program is welcome to come to our school and steal all of our ideas. I would be happy if someone would clone the program for their school." If you want to contribute to the Clown Troupe (they are raising funds for a van) or if you want information about the group, you can write Aileen at:

Prescott Clown Troupe, c/o Aileen Moffitt,  
3864 Brown Avenue, Oakland, CA 94619

Tax deductible checks can be made payable to: Friends of Oakland Parks and Recreation (their fiscal agent) and mailed to the above address.



***"All it takes is a warm heart and a red nose."***

Aileen Moffitt started this school clown program after taking a clown class with Arina Iscaason 20 years ago at the Oakland Parks and Recreation Department.

This will be the 15th season for the Prescott Clown Troupe. Last year in addition to the Senior Clowns, they incorporated a Junior Clown Troupe - third graders of 8 or 9 years old. This year the Junior Clowns will become the Senior Clowns. The Senior Clowns are 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders. However, when they give shows, some of the former clowns come back from middle and high school to add their energy.

The purpose of the program is twofold: 1) to provide leadership training, circus and performing skills training, and performing opportunities for the youngsters in a context that allows them to fully explore their talents, enrich self esteem, and develop as responsible citizens, and 2) to serve the community by providing professional-level entertainment by children for audiences of all ages.

During their last season they entertained at 15 schools, 25 classroom workshops and appeared at more than 30 community events.

The shows are done at times that do not conflict with school time. They miss only six days of school in the entire year. Aileen being a teacher makes the whole experience educational. The young clowns do a running story of their experience in their own "clown's story," and write all the "thank you letters"

Recruitment for new clowns begins each October and is open to all 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders. By November only the most committed remain. Students work 3-4 afternoons per week receiving training during the fall months. This includes many master classes with Bay Area circus professionals. In the winter, the clown troupe goes into rehearsal for spring and summer school performances.

# We are the world . . . .

These are skilled working clowns! They go to nursing homes to entertain the elders (and they greet each of them individually). At community centers and homeless shelters they perform and teach the children juggling. They present workshops in classrooms, and perform at community events, street fairs and parades.

The Clown Program attracts grant money and support from a variety of Bay Area businesses, so they can hire circus professionals to teach the children circus skills. It is important for the kids to learn skills. Because of this extensive and specialized training, the shows include stilting, juggling, magic, unicycling, balancing, rolling globe, tight-wire, and acrobatics as well as clown skits and hip hop dancing.

You can see the children on their breaks at school zipping around the school yard on their unicycles and practicing their juggling. In their equipment room (a converted bathroom) they have unicycles, stilts, juggling balls, juggling clubs, and Devil Sticks. The clowns can check out the equipment and practice at home, which in itself is an investment in the students' sense of self respect, confidence, and striving for excellence.

The performance starts with a rousing "Clown Cheer." Other numbers include juggling, unicycling, stilting, balancing on the globe and an American Sign Language song. Each year



they learn to sign a song and teach it to their audience. One year it was "We are the World" written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie (the chorus is the banner on these pages.). Last year it was "I Believe I Can Fly."

And the way these kids fly through a program is a joy to behold!



# . . . . We are the Children

# We are the ones who make a brighter day...

## **Everybody Wins**

For their performance last year, called “*Everybody Wins*,” the clowns chose the story of *The Tortoise and the Hare*. A California Arts Council Artist, Eric Newton, has been helping the Prescott Troupe for years. “(He has trained at Ringling Clown School, the Clown School of San Francisco, and the SF School of Circus Arts.) With the students, they developed the story through improvisation. They then set the movements and lines. There was a lot room for individualized interpretation of the actions and the way the different characters developed. The back beat was the rap tune by Coolio “*See you when you get there, if you ever get there, I’ll see you when you get there.*”

“The most interesting thing happened” Aileen related. “The traditional story, as we know it, ends when the tortoise beats the hare. This has two messages behind it -- slow and steady wins the race and if you have talent, don’t waste it. Yet for the kids, the tortoise winning at the end wasn’t enough. They wanted to know what happened to the rabbit -- the hare. Did it just disappear off stage? How did the rabbit feel? What happened to him? So we played with it and what we came up with was this. The rabbit was sick from eating too many carrots, so when he realized he lost the race, he was very disappointed. It was up to the Tortoise at the finish line to turn to the hare and say ‘Don’t give up!’



You can be a winner too, come on rabbit!’ Eventually the whole audience cheers the hare over the finish line.

“I think the Special Olympics very much inspired this change. Remember the event where one child falls and the one about to win turns to help his friend across the line so they can both finish? It’s about people with heart. We felt that the rabbit had to win too, no matter what mistakes he made along the way. It was great, because it developed out of the group. When I asked the kids for a title for the show, it became ‘Everybody Wins.’ So that was the phrase we yelled out during the whole show. For example, if it took three tries for a clown to get up on the globe. Everyone shouted “Everybody wins” and “Come on you can do it, everybody wins!”

### **Everyone wins and everyone gets a chance.**

They all know the skits and they will rotate doing them and leading them. Everyone gets to be a leader in a workshop. The goal is the child’s self esteem and their growth, not the production.



. . . . . So let's start giving

# There's a choice we're making. . .

## *Getting up with a smile becomes a habit!*

If a child falls off the unicycle, she/he gets up with a smile and tries again. They learn, "The show must go on." You see this repeatedly in their classes, rehearsals and sometimes in the performances. When a juggling ball drops, the clown picks it up with a smile and puts an index finger in the air which is the Prescott Clown short hand for "Give me one more chance." Getting up with a smile becomes a habit. It's part of the performance.

They also have meetings to share their feelings -- where the children have a chance to express their appreciation or sometimes non appreciation for each other. Aileen related one such meeting "The junior clowns - the third graders were still a little self centered and competitive, as kids their age will be. This is also the age they are learning compassion and consideration. At the end of one meeting a junior clown said to a senior clown. 'Thank you for letting me hand you the rings in the show.' She wasn't in the act, but she was happy to have some responsibility to be involved. Just to carry equipment and get to go. It may not sound like much, but it was so great to hear this respect for each other happening."



A Senior Clown Helps a Junior Clown with Diabolo Spinning.

"They get better every year, because they help each other."

"It always amazes me at how well they get along with each other."



Photo by Aileen Moffitt



Aileen spoke of a clown workshop the troupe did with a group of disabled children. "I tell the clowns at the beginning that over the year we will meet people with disabilities and we talk about it. However, when they actually meet these disabled kids, the magic comes from the clowns."

"After one workshop-performance with a group of physically challenged children, one of our clowns shared all the different adaptations she made to their performance with a blind girl. She just figured it out on her own. She said 'I let her touch my nose and then I let her feel the scarves. I described the scarf colors and I blew them into her face so she could feel them fly in the air. Then I let her sit on the unicycle. I know we don't let other kids touch the unicycles, but I asked permission and thank you for letting us do that because for her I think she needed to sit on it to know what it was like.' She figured this out all by herself in the spontaneous moment."

"Another time CiMore the Clown was teaching one child to juggle who had difficulties with release problems. He just went up to the kid and said 'Just pretend it's hot, just pretend it's hot!' He didn't know what the kid's disability was, he was -ust able to adapt and relate to the kid's problem. The child's mother was there and she was totally blown away. Her son was actually releasing the ball. The clown really got the child to relate in a way that most people don't have the patience to do."

# . . . . We're saving our own lives

# It's true we'll make a better day . .

Relating to a special population didn't faze' them one bit. They just take it for granted that it is their responsibility as clowns to make fun – not make fun of – make fun with.

“It's about spirit. The spirit with which they approach these disabled groups of children was special. They definitely take on that it is their responsibility as clowns to accept and meet everyone. They are developing their compassion in a real way.

“They are really contributing. It is not like they are passing out papers in the classroom. Kids know this is a phoney responsibility. Anyone can pass out papers, including the teacher. With the clowning, they know that this is real. I can't do what they do. No adult can do it the way they do it.”

“What is important is they love each other. They get better every year because of the influence of the kids from the year before. In the earlier years I didn't have anyone juggling clubs, now we have six or seven. They help each other. It always amazes me at how well they work together. If they were clowns together very often they remain best friends as they get older.

“I believe you need to improve the kid's reality. Kids need to have a childhood. It's not just about doing service, sure it includes service, but kids have to have fun -- and a chance to just have fun.

Their growth and sense of responsibility is nurtured within the context of having fun.”

At this age, social skills are being formed and compassion is learned. Juggling is suppose to balance the two sides of the mind -- right and left, heart and mind, soul and body. How privileged these children are to have Aileen Moffitt for their teacher.



Juggling balls to juggling life, balancing on the world globe to balancing life -- it's all part of the lesson plan in school and the greater lesson plan of life.



# . . . Just you and me . . .