

The following are some excerpts of the e-mail dialogue that went on between Mary O'Brien, and Shobi. She "was" a brand new caring clown a few months ago. Many have clown "callings," but are in remote areas not easily accessible to clown schools. This article is for you.

Mary hooked up with Beatrice Buttons of the Yukon (Story in V.3 No.4) and myself and took a leap of faith. There is such a need for clowns in nursing homes. If you take a leap of faith, stay in the present, you will get all the help you need.

You can understand when you read this first journal entry that Snicker's gift is her sweet self and her compassion. We didn't teach her that!

**Please note that names of the nursing home residents have been changed to protect SnickerDoodle's new friends.**

Dear Shobi Dobi: I'm just starting out and I'm scared to death. I have read a couple of books and pored over some websites and I have two costumes, three pairs of clown shoes, four noses, lots of props, a book on balloon hats and a box full of makeup.

My heart is bursting to do this work. How can I start out? Should I call the hospital and get a clown mentor? Should I just take the plunge? Should I take Snicker out for a trial run at my church with the kids there?

[Shobi's response: Get dressed and go shopping in "face." Get used to people smiling at you. Dust off the cars with a feather duster when you get gas. Being in face and doing the things you normally do will ease you into clowndom.]

Snicker took the plunge today and got herself all dressed up and took herself out to say "Hi" to the world. It took many hours in front of the mirror and lots of erasing and redoing and face scrubbing to get it juuuust right. We were so excited, we stayed up until 2 A.M. thinking and reading about all the tricks and props and gags and stuff we collected, and even then it was hard to fall asleep.

First, Snicker drove to the post office to mail a large envelope to her new friend, Beatrice Buttons in Canada. The tiny children had blank looks on their faces -- or curious ones -- when their mommies pointed to me. Their tiny eyebrows seemed to say, "How did you get your hair like that?" (It's pink and very large and fluffy). They looked away without smiling - just accepting that today was not their day to figure that one out. Then, Snicker drove right up to the movie theater and waddled in to see Patch Adams. The concession's woman saw Snicker's button and said "IYQ, too!" right back! What a wonderful, sad, hilarious, precious movie.

After a time, it seemed rather normal to be Snicker, the waddle-walk, the silence, the exaggerated facial expressions. As Snicker left and waddled back to her car, she was astonished to see that those who were most excited to see her were two 13-year-old boys. The gasp of glee jumped from their lips and the excitement sprang to their eyes before they could stop themselves and remember they were cool.

Snicker took the long way home, talking on her BIG cell phone when stopped at the intersection, grinning shyly at those who looked, frowning at the light until it turned green - waving big at the firemen who waved back even bigger.

It was not nearly as scary as she thought it would be. She's ready to call the nursing home first thing on Monday to set up a time to begin. Yee Haa!

January 1998: I called two places yesterday - one was the largest hospital in town, and they don't have clown visitors and the volunteer coordinator sounded pretty negative. The nursing home gal was excited, but said she would call me back this morning and I never did hear from her. How discouraging.

I have come up and sent an Introductory letter [See Page 16] to get my foot in the door somewhere. Shobi, I have good news, both the nursing home and the hospital have contacted me and are thrilled to have me come. Snicker will have her first clown visitation this Thursday!

### Snicker's Journal for her second day as a caring clowning.

February 4, 1999: I had my second visit to the nursing home today and it was soooo much better than the first. Now that I am better organized, I feel so much more comfortable. I'm a little shy about this, but I wanted to share my journal entry from today with you. I was so moved.

I called the activities director yesterday and said that I could only handle about an hour and a half at a time. I asked her to make a list of eight folks who needed a visit the most, and then to give me some information about each of them. I then asked her to make sure that those folks wanted a visit. She was happy to do that for me, and had just such a list ready for me when I got there.

Tim [Snickers husband] had oiled my wagon so it didn't squeak so horribly, which made me feel more relaxed. I also felt more calm about going in this time because I had learned a few things and had been able to make needed changes. I was very excited about bringing a tape player with me, as I had found music from the 20's up to the '50's, which I was sure would jog some memories. Boy, did they croon back then!

I'm finding that I would much rather visit with folks in their rooms. The first gal they took me to was in the lounge, and although I pulled her aside, we were being watched and that felt like performing. This precious lady talks and moans constantly as part of her illness, but she was able to recognize what I was doing and blended her responses in with the patter that her brain caused her to make. When she saw my wagon, she asked if I was bringing her gold to her.

Another woman in the lounge was on my list, and she was very lucid and working on a Wooster Scott jigsaw puzzle. I love puzzles, and I could tell that if I sat down with her as Mary, we could talk and puzzle up a storm for hours. It was harder to

interact with her as the silent SnickerDoodle, but she had such a warm sense of humor that she made ME laugh!

The younger gentleman who is slowly dying of MS was more awake today, but it's so hard to tell what he is thinking. He could be in there thinking, "Get the CLOWN out of my FACE!" He grunted a bit at me. What does that mean? Well, I just took a leap of faith and put some lotion on his hands. He kept his eyes closed as I massaged them, and I wondered if he was playing possum so that I would take a hike. When I came back from getting something from the wagon, he was alert again and grunted some more at me. I got close to his face so that he could see me with the one eye that seems to struggle to focus. I turned to look at the pictures in his room and when I looked back, he was asleep again. I kissed his bald head and waved goodbye.

I met a new woman today, she seems quite ill. She woke right up when I honked at her. The note by her name on my list said that she rarely speaks - we had that in common, at least. What a lovely lady. I turned on the music and as someone crooned, "It Might As Well Be Spring," her eyes grew round and soft. We had connected. I waved a pink carnation under her nose and she said, "That smells pretty!" I gently rubbed scented lotion into her bony, withered hands, and as I did so, her eyes closed and she grew very relaxed. I found a teddy bear up high on her TV shelf, and brought him down to dance with my teddy bear. She nodded at me, and when I put her bear up to her neck to "hug" her, she wrapped her arm around it and there it stayed. Even though she faded off several times, the minute I turned my back, she would be focused again and begging me with her doe eyes to just be with her a little longer. It was very, very hard to leave her room.

Had an oops! I walked in on a lady dressing, and when I came back later, she crankily told me that (motioning to the empty bed next to hers) "She's not here!" I turned back to my wagon and brought out a flower. Her eyes turned from stone-cold to tear-filled when I showed her that I came to see her. She still has her faculties, and was able to make-believe quite a bit with me. I made her a purple balloon hat to match her outfit, and then added a pink balloon flower. I have some really silly glasses that make your eyes look huge and googly, and gave her a pair. With her hat and glasses, she and I and the nurses were howling with laughter.

Betsy Boop was on the phone, so I didn't get to visit with her, but I gave her a flower and blew a kiss to her. Her eyes are very hollow and she just doesn't look good. What a precious, precious lady.

Jeannie is just barely among the living. I would not call her comatose, but she teeters on the edge. Last week she did not respond at all, although she will open her eyes when called by name. She seems to look past you, which makes it tough to get in her line of vision. Today, I took the tape player to the windowsill and turned on a very old song. She came alive - I don't know if it was with shock or confusion or rage - but she came out of her inner world and looked right at me. She could not smell the flower I put under her nose, but she could smell the lotion I rubbed into her gnarled hands. When I was through,

instead of having her hands tightly clamped to her chest, they laid peacefully in her lap. Her roommate, Lisa, is so precious.

As Mary, I could spend hours with Lisa, talking and holding her hand. The nurses love Lisa, too. What a gift Lisa is to the world - even laying in bed with a twisted body, she shines.

Freddie the Frog Keeper was not on my list, but I happened to spot him as I walked by his room. He was in a blind reverie, staring at nothing. I snuck up to his bed and honked. His face lit up like Christmas and he said, "That must be....!" He forgot my name, but he knew exactly who I was and he was thrilled to see me. If he only knew that I was just as happy to see him. He said that Toby (the frog I gave him last week) had behaved well, and that his wife had visited and loved him, too. I will live on his smile for a week.

When I visited Sara last week, I was fairly certain that she was humoring me. She really was thinking in her head that she would like to see me tortured by fire ants. I made her a balloon hat and offered some vain attempts to humor her. Later, I told the activity director that I didn't think she wanted me to visit her again, so she wasn't on my list today. However, I ran into her in the hall and greeted her as if she were an old friend, but only for a quick moment. Later, as I stood in the hallway for a moment, a lady walked up to me with tears in her eyes and told me what a wonderful thing I was doing. She told me that she was this woman's stepdaughter, and said how much my visit last week meant to the woman. She all but hugged me and we both got teary.

I came home and turned on a Calming Sea CD while I removed my "face." God had walked with me and answered my prayers for angels to ride in SnickerDoodle's wagon. Rather than exhausted, I was at peace and very moved. Even though the adrenalin was still flowing. I took a nap. The sleep of the Caring Clown is sweet, indeed.

[Mary can be reached by email at [tara@micron.net](mailto:tara@micron.net) ]

### SnickerDoodle's Basic Intro Letter

Below is part of the Introductory letter Mary used. She had it graphically prepared with her picture, address and phone number.

"I would like to introduce you to SnickerDoodle, a nonprofit clown visitor who is interested in clowning around for patients at your facility. A caring clown, Snicker is dedicated to bring humor to overcome pain and suffering, and to lighten the burden on families and care givers of those who are ill, as well.

"Snicker's philosophy is that one smile, one small gift of attention or distraction has the potential for healing the spirit of those who are ill, aging, or suffering in some way.

"Snicker is not an entertainer, but a visitor with more than one thing up her sleeve and a wagon containing several bags of tricks! Not overly happy or sad, she is just as content to lend a listening ear or play a game of checkers, as she is to perform tricks or make balloon critters or hats. Her aim is to give care and attention to the patient without the focus being on the "problem."