

Bringing Children Happiness One Clown at a time

*By Jeannie Lindheim
and members of her Hospital Clown Troupe*

Jeannie Lindheim has been teaching acting since 1970. She has taught at many universities and opened her own theater school in Brookline, Massachusetts in 1985. She has studied at Boston University, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, England and has a Master of Fine Arts from Brandeis University. She also offers a workshop to physicians called Special Connections: Communicating with Patients with Life-threatening Illness. She teaches this workshop at Harvard Risk Management Foundation.

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In 1996, I read Patch Adam's book *Geshunheit* and knew when I read his words, "I take clowns to Russia", that I had to go! So in November of 1996, I went to Russia with Patch. As I was putting all my fanny packs on the conveyer belt at the airport, I heard my husband yelling, "Watch your stuff!" I looked at him, smiled, waved good-bye and in that moment, I was nobody's wife, mother, teacher, or friend. I was just this incredibly silly clown who just didn't "get it". My clown was born in that instant! People think I am fairly intelligent, but the truth is that I really don't "get it." So my clown was based on myself, vulnerable and innocent.

One evening when I was sitting in my Moscow hotel room, I decided to start a Clown Troupe in Boston, my home town. I decided to offer a day-long workshop called *The Art & Joy of Hospital Clowning* in order to teach some techniques for hospital clowning. I honestly thought about 6 people might sign up. Twenty-five people registered and there were 25 on the wait list, much to my amazement! I have taught this workshop 3 times (once each year) and now have a troupe of 25 clowns. We did our first hospital visit May of 1997.

"Each of us has at least two people within us, the person that the world sees and the person we secretly believe we are. This secret person, the person of our dreams, is where the clown resides."

*-- Avner the Eccentric**

I studied with Avner the Eccentric at Celebration Barn* in South Paris, Maine in a 10 day workshop. He doesn't teach hospital clowning *per se*, but many of the tips and exercises were invaluable for our clowning. For example: 1) asking permission to enter exercise, 2) dealing with obstacles (a clown's delight), 3) learning how to use your breath, 4) status work -- how to discover if you are a low or high status clown and how to switch from low to high status and back again within the same clown character; and most of all 5) trusting the moment.

We did many exercises alone as: 1) make an entrance and do something with a chair, 2) make an entrance and play a musical instrument, 3) make an entrance and say, "Ladies and gentlemen, the show will begin in 5 minutes" and there we are,

alone on stage for 5 minutes, as a clown, totally delighted (or not) to have the stage to ourselves! The workshop was incredibly challenging and wonderful!

In my workshop, *The Art & Joy of Hospital Clowning*, I have a quote on the wall:

"It's not important what you know. It is important what you don't know and discover." -- Carlo Mazzone-Clementi

Often the participants do something in an improvisation, and it inspires in me a new idea for a whole exciting new technique we can use. They feed me, and I feed them. We are all very much in the moment of clowndom! The participants learn many tools and techniques that help them to discover their own unique clown. We also go out in public two times during the day, to try out what we have learned. We go to a supermarket (with permission from the manager) and to the Puppet Showplace Theater after a show, again with permission. The clowns are incredibly empowered when they see that the techniques they have learned in the morning work!

We do improvisational theater clowning. The key to this type of clowning in a Troupe is to be totally in the moment, with yourself and with each other.

After people take three day-long workshops they can join the troupe. A clown in the troupe can sign up for as many or few gigs as his/her schedule permits. We do about 4-6 hospital visits or parties per month. Three to ten clowns go to each hospital or party. Occasionally we are booked for 2-3 gigs on the same day, especially at holiday time. After each gig, we go around and share our feelings about the experience. Half of the troupe are silent clowns and at this point we are all volunteers. We visit most of the Boston hospitals and have clowned at many events: Make-a-Wish, Jimmy Fund Summer Festival, Special Olympics, Catholic Charities, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute parties, Why Me-children with Cancer, Easter Seals, and Walk for Hunger, AIDS Walk, and Reach for Recovery Breast Cancer Walk.

Each hospital visit is an hour and the parties we do are an hour and a half. It is all improvisation theater clowning. We have a lot of shticks and routines we do, but a lot of our clowning is made up on the spot. We are fairly high energy and although an hour may not seem like a long time, it is! We are exhilarated and exhausted after each visit.

Our Goals are:

- To empower each child we visit. (Children teach the clown how to behave).
- To invite the child and family to enter the magical clown world where, for a moment, they can forget illness.
- To help alleviate a child's fears and anxieties through humor and caring.
- To spread joy at parties and special events for children who are ill and for their families.
- And always to create an environment that will help the healing process.



Top row (left to right): Jenny Morris, Chris Yatko, Mark Gorman, Linda Simon, John McClain, Beth Regan, Byron Santos and Nancy Gertz; Bottom row (left to right): Cathie Lucas, Jeannie Lindheim, Kate Schalk .

What do you do in the hospitals? I have asked the clowns to write things they do at the hospital. The following list gives you an idea of how we operate (no pun intended).

Clown Tie-up: One clown ties up 2-4 clowns in jump rope. The clowns try to untangle themselves, but in the process get more and more tangled up. The clowns ask the child to help them get untangled. We try to follow the child's instructions, but usually bumble it up. The child finally does get us all untangled by his marvelous suggestions! Helping us get untangled empowers the child.

Marionettes: This involves 2 clowns, one casting a magic spell over the other either by tapping them on her head or hand with a magic wand. This magically changes the clown into a marionette. The clown orchestrates the marionette's movement by tapping the body part and pulling up an invisible string to control that body part. Hands can be made to clap, legs can go forward, up or backward, a nose can have a string attached to it. Then the child can be given control of the magic wand and control the clown/ marionette. Sometimes we can just tap a clown's hand and pull up on the imaginary string and then give the string to the child so the child can manipulate the clown.

Symphony Conductor: The conductor is leading a symphony: One clown takes a big comb or prop and makes a sound and points to another clown and makes a sound, "dododododo".

That clown does that sound. Then the maestro points to another clown to add a sound and note. If there are 4-5 clowns in the

room, each clown gets a note or sound. We then add the child, visitors, siblings or parents. The *clown maestro* conducts this wonderful symphony, which is made up ridiculous sounds. Sometimes the conductor can just point to one clown at a time, then add another clown, etc. We then give the baton to the child so he/she can conduct us in any way he likes. This empowers the child for they have total control over all of the clowns!

You press your nose and your tongue goes out. Child touches your right ear and your tongue goes to the right. She touches your left ear and your tongue goes to the left. Every time she touches one ear, your tongue goes in that direction. She touches your nose and tongue goes back into your mouth.

Use a baton to hypnotize a clown or wind up a clown to activate him.

Use a child's remote control for a train, and remote control the clown, forward, backward, etc.

Clown has wind up doll and clown winds doll up and then imitates doll. Clown let's child pick another doll and "wind up the clown."

"As hospital clowns, we use the simple human gifts of kindness and respect for each other's inner beings. We seek to uncover and cherish the hidden spirit of joy and creative energy that lives in the heart and soul of every child and those who love them, a spirit so often hidden away by the frightening experience of disease and disability."

– Anne-Marie Audet, Member of the Troupe

Round Singing: We often sing in a round "Row, row, row, your boat." Of course, we do it badly and totally mess it up.

Obstacles Galore: We get stuck to each other and cannot get loose, trade clothes, put things on inside out and upside down, put shoes on the wrong feet and have the child help us in any way we can.

Parent might say, " Oh, look at the clown's hat." The clown looks around to find his hat and cannot find it. She is totally unaware that it is on her head.

Yo-yo: We do tricks with Yo-Yo as Round the World, walk the dog and other tricks. Of course we totally mess up all of our tricks, but always take a bow. If the child is well enough, we give the Yo-Yo to him and let him try. We cheer with delight whatever the child does.

Play harmonica quietly accompanying anything going on in the room that has excitement or drama or just play it for the clowns dancing around in glee! Play harmonica in the rooms or by the elevator to accompany clowning or just for fun. Variation: Clown makes big production of playing harmonica. Slowly unwraps it from wrappings. Unsuccessfully plays from the wrong end. Tries again on the wrong end. Child may attempt to show or tell clown which way to play. Clown again tries the wrong end. Finally, finds the correct side and plays off key tune, but very pleased with herself.

Ball games: Pass the ball in a circle or between two clowns and ball gets stuck on the clown's hand.

We have a foam ball, a bat which can be a huge toothbrush, comb or scissors and have a pitcher clown toss the ball to a clown. One clown trots around quietly showing everyone where 1st, 2nd, 3rd base and home plate are. The corner of the bed might be first base, the wall might be 2nd base, the other side of the bed might be 3rd base, and where we start out is Home Plate. It is often just a very tiny area that we run around from 1st to 2nd to 3rd base. The "baseball diamond" might be 3 feet total. One clown, or the child if she is well enough, can pitch the ball. The clown up to bat misses the ball, but thinks she hit a home run and run the bases, as fast as she can, which in fact looks like a turtle's pace, and is delighted to finally arrive at home plate. The clown thinks she hit a home run and is cheering ecstatically, when in fact, she never even contacted the ball. It looks ridiculous! We always miss it though or hit it lightly so as not to knock anything over. Some clowns use the rubber chicken as the bat. Their game is mimed, with the batter believing the call is a ball, while the pitcher believes the call is a strike. The arguments over the call can get heated with the two clowns going nose to nose arguing the call. In the end, they shake hands and go on their way.

Basketball: Clown who has big pants on pulls them way out from his waist and another clown uses the pulled out pants as a basketball hoop and throws the ball in the other clown's pants. The child can throw ball too, which empowers the child..

Clown takes off clown hat and gives ball to child. Child tries to make a basket and get the ball in the hat

Juggling: Juggling one real ball and one invisible ball, pretending it is difficult. Another variation is to give each clown a ball. We all throw up our own ball and catch it. We bow. That is our sensational juggling act. And we are so proud of ourselves! Another variation that two clowns do with

juggling: One clown is the juggler with a big build up with 3 juggling balls. As they are ready to go, the 2nd clown stops them and adds another object to juggle (large plastic scissors, harmonica, rubber chicken, feather duster, etc.) this goes on until the clown can barely hold all the objects with a look of fear on his face at the thought of juggling all the objects. The first clown then shakes his head and tries to pass all the objects to the other clown. They shake their head and try to get the child or family member to attempt the juggling act. The last variation to juggling is the 1st clown attempts to juggle missing balls. The child will tell the clown where the balls are and help to retrieve them if physically possible. The clown tries again, but no success. Tries with only 2 balls. No success. Goes down to 1 ball and is able to successfully toss ball and catch. The clown is very pleased with himself!

We sometimes arrive on the floor as clowns in a long line which is a train and tooting quietly as we go, and leaving the floor in a line tooting again as we leave.

Clowning in cafeteria with staff, kids, parents. Having them weigh my rubber chicken instead of my salad

One clown carries one prop, a Little Magic Story Book whose pages are quite bare. Clown pretends pages are absolutely alive with color and activity. The children quickly catch on and soon there are as many stories being created as there are kids to create them. Some tales are highly colored-bold and imaginative. Others are overcast and subdued-self narratives from the lonelier, more frightened patients. The Story book is a wonderfully sensitive vessel constantly receiving their feelings- those who boldly pretend and want to fly away and leave who they are and those who choose to stay quietly.

One clown can imitate what a child is doing. When the child catches on, he can imitate the clown. It is like looking in a mirror.

Clown has a slinky and the clown gets all entangled in the slinky.

Clown goes to sneeze, ah ah ah , and does not sneeze. Clown tries to stifle the sneeze and succeeds many times, and then finally, finally sneezes!

Children love to see their parents laugh and be part of a clown's routine. One way to do this is by having the clown ask the parent to lift one leg and then when lifted, having them lift the other leg. When the parents try to explain, they cannot. The clown keeps trying to have them do it. The child enjoys this give and take between their parents and the clown.

One clown does a magic trick. He places an egg on his hands, makes a big deal of showing "nothing up his sleeve", he stuffs the egg in his pants, wave his hands with a magic word, and then pulls a rubber chicken out of his pants..

The nose game - when child presses each clown nose, they each make a different sound each time.

Dance with rubber chicken/get rubber chicken to lay egg/ do artificial respiration on the rubber chicken/ have the rubber chicken sing!