

And from the Yukon

By Janet Koschreck of Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada

In Vol. 3, No. 4, Janet shared “*Smiling Inside and Outside, I am Beatrice Buttons*” -- her clown’s experiences at the Whitehorse Correctional Center. Here she shares the birth of her new clown.

It is difficult to write the story of *April Azalea Bluebells* because she grew out of such terrible pain. However, with the personal healing experiences with my first clown, *Beatrice Buttons*, I am certain that the pain will lessen as this clown’s “magic” works its healing power.

While *Beatrice Buttons* and I were enjoying a clowning conference on health and humor in Winnipeg, October of 1998, a young woman died tragically back in my home territory, the Yukon. Twenty-three year old April Annett was hiking with her brother and a friend on Thanksgiving Sunday, when she slipped and fell from the mountain trail and was killed instantly. I knew April as an enthusiastic youth leader in our church and as an extraordinarily caring person on staff at Tree House Play school where I volunteer. However, it wasn’t until after her death that I began to understand what a very great loss she was to our community.

When I first learned of April’s death, a seed of hope was planted in my heart, and the Great Creator began to form a caring clown in April’s memory, bearing April’s name. My pastor suggested I give her family time to mourn and heal a little before I asked for their blessing. So, for the next nine months, the seed slowly took root and I recorded much of *April A Bluebells’* growth from conception to birth in my journal. I knew she would be unlike *Beatrice Buttons* in many ways: she would travel lighter, with only a backpack, leaving her hands free for dancing and delighting; she would be more youthful, happiest as a companion for children and youth; very silly and yet sensitive; and a free spirit.

To become better acquainted with April Annett’s personal life and character, I watched videotapes of three memorial life- appreciation services - two in Whitehorse and one in her parents’ home in Ontario. I also began corresponding with her mother and visiting with her aunt and cousins, here in Whitehorse. Almost immediately, April’s family gave me their blessing and a great deal of encouragement! They believed that a clown “is a lovely tribute to April.” I learned that April loved to sing, even though she couldn’t carry a tune. I also discovered her deep faith in and love for God, and her gift of living life to the fullest. April’s greatest joy was children, especially her four-year-old cousin, Drew. April Annett also worked enthusiastically with Guides, Pathfinders, Big Brothers and Big Sisters of the Yukon and ran an after school program for youngsters. I knew I couldn’t do all that, but my “newest clown on the block” could exemplify some of her gentleness, hilarity, passion and compassion.

As a long-time believer in the power of prayer and God’s sense of humor, I watched with great joy (and a little apprehension) *April A Bluebells’* growth. Slowly, through the long Yukon winter, her costume was appearing on bits of paper. I remember sitting in a restaurant sketching her outfit on a napkin, and sharing my excitement with my very supportive husband, Fred. Beginning at her head, I was determined she wouldn’t wear a wig! (I’d learned from *Beatrice Buttons’* experience how warm and uncomfortable

a wig can be, especially in over-heated nursing homes.) Instead, she would have delightful hats to match her personality, appropriate for different “gigs.” When I explained to April’s aunt that I wanted this new clown to wear a “recycled” hat created from bread bags, she almost collapsed laughing because April “practiced recycling to a fault.” The formal hat *April Azalea Bluebells* would wear for her commissioning service is a toilet tissue roll cover - a perky white “thing” created from plastic bags, cut into strips and crocheted by a very talented woman - not me!

A long, pure white cotton nightgown was tie-dyed using “Madonna Blue” dye and almost immediately, *April A Bluebells* had a day gown she could wear for all occasions! (She wears it backwards and inside out to symbolize that she’s turned herself inside out to expose her heart and soul.) Along with a Yukon-plaid bowtie and an inside-out blazer, she is “improperly dressed,” indeed. Picture the shoulder pads sitting precariously, exclaiming, “no chip here” and “only joy!” For those who remember, “There’s a Bluebird on My Shoulder” you can picture a tiny one sitting next to joy. Periwinkle, another caring clown here in town, showed me her catalogue advertising “angel boots.” I knew *April A Bluebells* would love them, not only for comfort, but also to remind her of April Annett’s love for hiking.

Today, those boots remind April A Bluebells to tread lightly and go where angels and caring clowns love to go - into the very



hearts of people who need her joyful, hopeful presence.

I had originally planned for *April A Bluebells* to simply adopt the same goals as *Beatrice Buttons*, but April Annett’s aunt requested a public ceremony in which the family and the community could witness “something good coming out of a tragedy.” April’s family flew to Whitehorse for Thanksgiving, to make a pilgrimage to the area April died, to connect with the people who loved her here, and to participate in *April A Bluebells* the Clown’s commissioning service at Whitehorse United Church on the Canadian Thanksgiving Sunday, October 19, 1999.

. . . April Azalea Bluebells

Indeed, it was with a glad, sad heart that we celebrated April Annett's life, and sent her namesake on her merry way. The Whitehorse Correctional Center's chaplain, Tree House Play School staff, April's sister and five year old cousin, Drew, Girl Guides, another child and youth all gave "the newest clown on the block" special blessings. Perhaps the most important was April's sister declaring, "Remember that not only are you a child of God, but also each person you meet is a child of God. Demonstrate that awesome love with song, word and dance."

The chaplain concluded the informal service with, "Go forth into the world, daring to love and to care. With a mission of mischief, unsettle the comfortable and comfort the unsettled. Live up to your calling as a minister of God's love."

April A Bluebells A's first "job" was at the Whitehorse Correctional Institute where *Beatrice Buttons* usually goes. It was a good night to be there, to give support to the chaplain. A female inmate had committed suicide a week earlier and the chaplain was weary with ministering to both the staff and the inmates.

Because *April A. Bluebells* had never been to jail before, the chaplain gave her a complete tour and therefore met many guards and inmates all along the route. She was warmly received and everyone seemed happy to shake her hand as she introduced herself as "the new clown on the block" and invited them to "church."

In her first worship the "free spirit" was very evident as she met and greeted every staff person and inmate! The most exciting and blessed moments for me at the jail was when *April A Bluebells* sang her theme song -- *Sunshine and Shadows.*" She told the worshipers how life is made up of shadows and sunshine and how God is in the shadows of our lives as well as in the sunshine.

Sunshine and shadow, Clear skies and rain, Good times and bad times, Pleasure and pain, Summer and winter, Spring-time and Fall, Sunshine and Shadow, We'll share the all

The chaplain wrote later to say, "... not what you'd expect from a clown, because she admits she's human and has suffered too. This is very refreshing . . . this tells those she meets that underneath the masks, clowns are human, too!"

When he told me his message for the next Sunday's worship circle was "The Healing Power of Humor," I knew it was the right time for *April A Bluebells*' visit. Attendance was good for both services and the chaplain used my copy of House Call: How we can heal our world one visit at a time by Patch Adams, telling a little of Patch's story.

Later I asked the chaplain for constructive criticism, but I think he thoroughly enjoyed her. He said, "she's spontaneous, funny, sings well and makes people smile -- and she's only a week old!" When I expressed my concern that this new clown was "taking over" the worship, he said he wished he'd asked her to! He remarked, in the e-mail: "Your instincts are a blessing. Please continue to trust them. As for self-control . . . again . . . trust is the key . . . sometimes letting go is exactly what's needed. Cheers!"

I truly believe that each of my clown goes out "on a wing and a prayer," supported by praying friends and empowered by God.

What more could anyone ask for?

I ran across this letter-card from a dear, dear friend who has lovingly encouraged *Beatrice Buttons* and was so thrilled with the idea of a caring clown carrying April Annett's name.



Janet, Janet, my dear Janet - I just received your letter and it suddenly hit me. I should've known who April A Bluebells was . . . my heart flooded with joy! I cried. Our dear Lord has worked wonders and moved hearts (both in deep sorrow and joy) far beyond my comprehension. I just know and believe . . . and delight in the exuberant faith that both Beatrice Buttons and April A Bluebells have showered on so many. I'm simply moved to tears (pure joy) that out of pain, and in the memory of such a wonderful woman comes this spirit of love and compassion of a caring clown. All God's angels, including April, must be dancing in great delight. The little ones' hearts that once were broken with sadness now can heal and mend with a tender hand, a bright smile and gentle laughter. I love you so much. Always, always my prayers are with you and your beautiful ministry."

And, finally, a wee prayer that I read each time I send a clown out to play:

*When morning breaks, and I face the day,
This, dear Lord, is what I pray,
That when the same day fades to gray,
Some child of Yours may happier be,
May find himself more close to thee,
Because I lived this day.*

Janet is happy to share with anyone who writes. She is at 63-13th Avenue, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada Y1A 4K6 or email to <fkoschzeck@hyperteck.yk.ca>