

# The Anything But Serious Clowns

by Valerie Haley of Dayton, Ohio

"Anything But Serious" Hospital Clown Troupe is the brainchild of Valerie Haley. In addition to the clown troupe, Valerie is the Program Specialist for the Kettering Medical Center Network (KMCN) Years Ahead Program. She is responsible for planning, developing, implementing, and managing programs geared toward Older Americans. This includes educational programs, screenings, and social events. Years Ahead is a free hospital based senior membership program for anyone over 50.

Today Years Ahead boasts over 68,000+ members. The mission of *Years Ahead* is to provide health and lifestyle services that help to keep seniors healthier and happier longer. Valerie saw the movie "Patch Adams" - and saw how humor could be beneficial to the seniors in the nursing home and hospital setting, and thus the clown troupe was born. Valerie is a 34-year-old wife and mother of two young children, all of whom are members of the clown troupe - including the family dog. She was born and raised in Springfield, Ohio and has a background in marketing and business management.

Shobi's note: Valerie had sent me several of the group's give away ideas (See page 15-17). As I began to communicate through email with Valerie about the give-aways, she began to tell me more and more about her group. I was so impressed with her message that I just put it all together for you to read.

The group started in November of 1999. We have 60 clowns in the group but only 48 of them are what I call active clowns. Then I have a group of about 10 clown wanna-bee's who don't have the courage to get out and actually clown yet - so they maintain the mailings, make the give away's, and do a lot of the clerical support.

We are funded primarily by donations. We get these when we go out and do speaking engagements primarily for churches. Some nursing homes do pay us some funds - about \$30 out of their activity budgets. The hospital has given me an annual \$300 budget for supplies that we just try and keep replenished with the donations. As you know, \$300 does not go far when purchasing balloons, etc. A lot of the clowns donate their own supplies.

My group is a mixed group representing all ages of clowns. Six of them are staff of the hospital who volunteer their time. Three of them work in pastoral services. I have two teenagers, one severely handicapped, several grandchildren who make special appearances (mostly on Mothers' Day), I have two volunteers who are younger but on disability for MS and wanted a purpose, then the rest are primarily retired seniors and professional clowns who want to give back to the community. We even have a certified pet therapy dog/clown.



From Left to right: James *Spots* Haley holding *Oreo* the group mascot, Randy *Bis-Kits* Webner, Maxine *Dr. Max* French, and Sharon *Cookie* Taylor. Photo by Lee Ann Yahle

Our Mascot Oreo likes to visit the children at the battered women and children's center. But his favorite place to go is the local nursing homes. Pictured here he is performing at Bethany Lutheran Village. He always seems to steal the show. The skit they have worked out is that Spot gets hungry and Cookie always loves cookies. She is a mad cap chef that makes homemade clown cookies. "By the way has anyone seen OREO?" Cookie talks about how she loves Oreo's and likes to dunk them in milk. "There's nothing like a milk bath." About that time they say again "Has anyone got my OREO?" Oreo comes out with a backpack on filled with mini packages of oreo cookies that we pass out (with permission of course). Then he gets to go around and get lots of hugs. It's a tail wagging good time.

One of our volunteers, Cathie Anderson, works at the hospital in environmental services and then volunteers as a clown. Her character is "Whichway" - she doesn't know whether she is coming or going. She recently won two awards for clowning. The Nursing Home she clowns for nominated her for these. Cathie went to a doctor for poison ivy and while there had her annual physical. She had cancer and had to have her kidney removed. While in recovery she felt so strongly about not letting her nursing home residents down, that she went and clowned in spite of her illness. Her quick wit and good humor inspired many who were there.

The best thing about my clowns are their hearts. Most of them are not of the professional level. Their make up may not be perfect, their outfits are mostly homemade and some of them are still thrift store clowns. They might only be able to make two different balloon sculptures. But the kids and the nursing home residents don't notice because they genuinely care and go to these places because they want to make a difference, not because they are paid to or because they have to.

The clowns listen to the residents and they interact with them. When appropriate they hug them. So many need this kind of interaction. So many times we are told, "Since I became ill people have been afraid to touch or hug me."

In the hospice units the staff love the clowns because for the hour they are in the unit, that unit takes on a more lighted-hearted feeling - even lowers their blood pressures.

In the nursing homes sometimes they are told to get out of a room by the patient. But you know what - that is ok. That might be the only time when the patient makes a request and is actually listened to. We just empowered that person to take a little control back in their life - because the doctor won't leave, the nurse won't leave, so we respect their privacy.

"Yes" I am a clown. "My character is called "Pennies." I pass out pennies - actually I drop them accidentally on purpose.

I found a penny today  
Just laying on the ground,  
But it's not just a penny  
This little coin I found.  
Found pennies come from heaven,  
That's what my dad told me,  
He said when an angel misses you,  
They toss a penny down,  
Sometimes just to cheer you up  
To make a smile out of your frown,  
So don't pass by that penny,  
When you are feeling blue,  
It may be a penny from heaven  
That an angel's tossed to you!

My character is still under development. I am still a thrift store clown though I am working on that. Clowning is my escape and my time to let loose. Clowning is my way of not having to be so serious and responsible all the time. Responsibility can be such a burden making you old before your time. Life tends to beat the kid out of you - you get so wrapped in it that you forget to laugh.

Last year at Halloween - I knew we were doing something good. I take my little girls clowning with me. I thought this would be good for them to learn how to volunteer and do some good on their own. I did not realize how much they had picked up. Jurisha is four and Pailey is two. Jurisha's clown name is *Dot* and Pailey's is *Freckle*.

My family lives in Springfield - I live in Centerville. Trick or Treat is done by township - so as a result my girls get to go out twice. Once in our neighborhood and once with their cousins. Jurisha wanted to be a witch. When we got home the first night she knew she got to go out trick or treating again the following night. She said "Can I be a clown instead of a witch?. I said "Sure, but why?" She gets to dress up as a clown quite frequently - keep in mind we had searched high and low for just the right hat, black nails, black hair, stuff to make warts - the works. Her reply was, "I've been thinking about it and I would rather dress up as a clown and make people happy by passing out hug coupons than to scare them." So that is what she did - she knocked on the door - gave the person a hug coupon and a hug and then took her candy and ran. Pailey dressed as a butterfly, just gave hugs and forgot the candy. It was quite comical.

I was not a big clown fan when I was little but the idea grew on me after seeing "Patch Adams." I went to the clown training because as a volunteer coordinator I promised my volunteers and staff that I would never ask them to do anything that I wouldn't do myself. Plus to truly understand what they do and what they put up with, it helps to walk in the clown's big shoes, so to speak.

The original training that I organized was a free six week - crash course in clowning. They met once a week for three hours. We covered clown ethics, hospital clowning (policies, etc.), juggling, clown magic, no-prop clowning, skits, improvisational skills, make-up, developing your character, humor, and ballooning. Keeping in mind that you could have had a six week course on any/all of the above subjects. We hired Fred Junkala from Masters Entertainment to train us. He got so caught up with the group that he ended up donating more and more of his time. If I am the mother of the group then he is the father. He was so excited - as this is a different type of clowning than what he does as a profession. It was his way of giving back to the community. He has been a tremendous asset. We offered both a day school and a night school. Clowns could attend both classes if they wanted to.

After these courses several of the clowns dropped out. I think many of them thought it was just slapping on a little bit of make up and heading out. It is fun, but it is still a lot of work.

Later I chose not to do another clown school program, but rather to give the existing clowns additional schooling to help them become better clowns. Both groups meet once a month for about two hours. At these meeting we practice skits, talk about performances, share tips, in some cases it is almost like a support group. But mostly we laugh. A couple of times a year we bring in some paid training, and Fred comes in a couple of times a year to help us. I also send clowns to different trainings and then they come back and teach/share with the rest of the group.

It does not cost to be a part of our group, but every clown is responsible for their own make up and outfits. I supply balloons, stickers, face painting stuff, etc. Every clown adopts a nursing home or some other facility. I mail out monthly reminder letters with a list of upcoming performances. The volunteers pick their assignments and call in times they are available. The assignments are the ones where we get donations -- It is the bread and butter of the group. I use these donations to purchase more supplies and to pay for additional training. These assignments are in addition to the Nursing Home or hospital clowning assignment that they have adopted. They go out in pairs and visit their adopted facility at their own discretion. Usually about twice a month.

Each of the meetings has an agenda and a theme. The clowns take turns helping to teach the classes. For example, Anita "*Folly*" Gerstle, did a class on developing your character. To prove a point, we had to eat plain Jell-O (yuck!) - point being that was an undeveloped character. Then we got to eat Strawberry Jell-O, the point being the rich flavor is like that of a developed clown character. It has flavor, fullness, body and you leave remembering the taste. She gave out clown character descriptions and exercises to help us develop our characters. Cheryl "Ethel" Bailey and Linda Pak organized the evening classes.

### ***Knowing Your Volunteers***

The reason the group is successful is because you have to know your volunteers and what motivates them. Obviously, it is not money. People in general like to be successful. So you find their skills and build off of their successes. Each one of my volunteers contributes something different. Each brings something valuable to the group. Each clown by themselves - a single piece -- could not do what this group does as a whole. But together as a group we enrich each other and make the troupe a whole.

## ***We all have strengths and weaknesses and together as a team we balance each other out.***

I stress it is not who has the best outfit or who is the best juggler. Find your strength and your skill and make it work for you. Be the best you can be using the assets you have available to you. So to my clown that has Parkinson's I say, "So you can't draw the lines on your face straight because your hand shakes - so what do the best you can and make it work for you - become shaky the clown." Develop your character around you flaws and make your flaws become part of your character. If your only skill is passing out stickers - big deal - be the best *sticker passer outer in the state of Ohio*. You're fat - who cares - kids love big clowns - you have a larger lap and more of them can sit on it at one time. The point being always strive to be better and do the best you can, but do what works for you. Don't sit back and not clown around because your make up is not perfect. You could go broke waiting to buy that fancy "professional looking" clown outfit. Not that they are not nice - it's just not in everyone's budget. It's a circle. The more you clown the better and more comfortable you get. The more comfortable and better you get, the more you want to clown.

The skill I bring to the group is my organizational skills and of course the backing of the hospital. You have to have a point person who believes in the project and can push the project. I am that point person. It is important to hold those monthly meetings and to send those letters. If a clown is not clowning - call them, see what's up and pull them back into the group. Make each one feel special. If you don't have a point person, the group will slowly diminish. Most of the clowns don't want to be the point person - it's a lot of work and the least fun job. Their biggest strength and at the same time their biggest weakness is that they are all volunteers. If something comes up - they might change their mind and decide not to do a show. This could leave you short handed. This is what I bend over backwards to avoid. If a group has booked you for a show and you do a poor job it reflects badly on the hospital and also on future referrals. In order to maintain the success of the group you can't have that. You must always maintain that reputation and have good customer service skills. So to help out with that we only have about a handful of skits that we do. We of course update and change. But the idea is - that if the skits are simple and we all know them - anyone can fill in at anytime as needed. So the skits are fairly simple - simplicity is another key.

It is important to keep a positive image in the community, as it helps to justify the group to the hospital. Administration is always asking "Is this necessary? How does it help the hospital? Why should we keep this group if it is not revenue generating?" The challenges to clowning are never-ending. So although I don't clown as much as I would like - my gift to the group is being the point person, handling paperwork, fighting the political battles, and smoothing over the rough edges, that help to pave the path to a successful group.

This idea of a small clown program that we would use only on occasions has blossomed into a much larger community outreach program - larger than I had ever imagined possible! If I could ever secure appropriate funding - we could probably take it to the moon.