

Peruvian Clown Relief

By John Kapferer aka Clem "T"

American Red Cross Opens Relief Pipeline to Peru

June 25, 2001 — When a massive 7.9-magnitude earthquake shook southern Peru on Saturday, June 23, the Peruvian Red Cross immediately responded in the affected areas of Arequipa, Moquegua and Tacna. Red Cross workers continue to provide first aid as well as helping in search and rescue operations for those trapped in collapsed buildings. With more than 70 reported killed, over 1,000 injured and more than 12,000 families affected, the American Red Cross has joined the Peruvian Red Cross to get relief to the earthquake victims.

The Red Cross called me Saturday afternoon and I got on the plane for Peru Saturday night. I packed just clown clothes and didn't even take a camera. That was on June 23 and I stayed for about a week. I went with mostly doctors and rescue crews from my area. The Red Cross paid my airfare as I was part of a crew.

I drew on my many years of military experience helping with disaster recovery, supply distribution, and shelter construction. So when we arrived I used my military experience to help set up tents, lean-tos, and overhead cover to protect us from the elements while we were sleeping. We stayed in tents with the populous -- wherever we could find a place to curl up and sleep.

Wherever they needed me, I was there. I didn't get into the really heavy areas. But you go in wherever they wanted you. I worked handing out food, water and medical supplies to the adults and children, as well as, the care givers that were there.

Clowning all day long, every day - I even sweat in colors!

Putting up tents and moving building materials was handled with a smile on my face and fun and giggles to keep everyone in a good sense of humor. We had a great time working because, as you know, nothing seems to work right for Clem T the first time. So we had fun with our work.

Keep in mind that I did all of my activities in clown costume. When I am in costume and makeup, all I do is relate as a clown. If I shed my costume parts, I always have colorful garments on underneath or around my head. I was never out of clown, if only with makeup, colorful shorts, wig hat, socks, and a bright "T" shirt. I even sweat in colors!!!!

My main responsibility was to work with the children and local adults who had lost all of their possessions and homes. Many hours were spent just being there for the people and volunteers, with jokes, Klutz magic, and smiles. Holding a hand, rubbing a back, combing someone's hair, or just listening was a valuable part of my experience. I would sit and hold hands, rub backs and comfort the local people as well as the volunteers.

People need someone to lean on and were so open to a clown. You see the smiles and the wide eyes when they see you, you can even feel the compassion that you give to them. Just having someone there that they could relate to in a happy way. The clown is so inviting that way.

I liked just holding children of all ages and that doesn't take a lot of physical energy, but does take some emotional energy and it gave me time to recharge my batteries inside. I may break character but that is when I go off by myself or when I get away from the action.

Giving from the Heart

Even though I brought three boxes of stuffed animals, I could have used ten more! Many a night I would see the children holding the bears, pigs, dogs, horses and other animals while they were sleeping. However, my belief is that a clown can give of themselves and not be a vending machine -- always giving material things. Giving of oneself means a lot more to the individuals we come in contact with than anything else.

Working with doctors and medical personnel was a high point of my days -- it gave me time to pick up their spirits and have some fun. Even their patients enjoyed the frolicking and merriment among the staff.

The clown was such a comfort for people working there. I just went up and joked around and played. I would bat a few balloons around. 360's are really easy to play catch with or bounce them off the walls. I use them as baseball bats with 6 inch rounds for the ball. They think that's funny when I "hit" them on the head with one -- it certainly doesn't hurt. They laugh and giggle.

Night came too quickly most days after playing with the people all day. After 16 hour days the staff would talk and evaluate what we would do the next day. I would always try to bring some sort of levity to the situation to break the tension.

Even though I had all this military experience, the biggest asset I brought was my 13 years of clowning experience. I feel that over the years I have gained valuable experiences from the clowns that I have met. My trips with Patch Adams to Russia, Bosnia, and China have helped me fine tune my clowning talents. I feel that I am always learning from the clowns, training courses, and conferences that I attend.

Over the years the clowns I have met on my travels have kept a constant dialog with all of us to let us know what they are doing and what new experiences they have had. I hope that this will continue for many years to come. I could write pages about the clowns I have met over the years and how they are all giving from the heart. I want to thank those clowns that have shared their ideas, jokes, balloon twisting, and talents with me -- It has made me a better clown and a better person.

Accommodations are bad for a woman relief worker, and most women don't have the physical strength; however, women can do a lot that guys cannot on the emotional side of it. A male/female clown team might work really well.

I am working with several corporations in an effort to get support for these types of trips with financial and material donations.

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