

Dr. Bugg -- A Pioneer Hospital Clown

Dr. Bugg aka Chuck Rinkel was one of the first clowns in the United States who began regular visit to hospitals and nursing homes. Shrine clowns and circus clowns been visiting in hospitals for years, but it was quite another job to visit in the same hospital or nursing home on a continuing basis, from week to week, month to month and year to year.

Chuck Rinkel was born in Pittsburgh, KS, attending college at Kansas State Teachers College in his hometown when he returned from his tour of duty in the army at the end of WWII. Following graduation he entered Boston University School of Theology becoming a pastor in the Iowa Des Moines Annual Conference of The Methodist Church in 1954. He began his clown career in 1976 as a whiteface clown, Itschuck, while serving as pastor of The First United Methodist Church in Ottumwa, IA. Chuck's hospital clown was a tramp clown, Dr. Bugg. Dr. Bugg wrote a regular column for *The New Calliope*, the bimonthly magazine of Clowns of America International, for five years, and was a regular guest on the Fox Kids Club/Channel 14 in Ottumwa for two years

Dr. Bugg Tells His Story

Ever since I was in Jr Hi, I had an off and on interest in magic. Harvey Brown, a personal friend, and fellow International Brotherhood of Magicians member, and I started a magic club for adults and youth, that met at the church. I decided that this time around, I was really going to get serious about magic and do some professional entertaining. Soon I discovered that my presentation of magic was not as entertaining as I wanted it be, so I decided to do my magic as a clown and see if that was more entertaining. A Shrine clown gave me an introductory booklet published by the old Clowns of America group and I had a pastor friend that I saw once or twice a year that gave me some help. Otherwise, I learned the art through experience in and around Ottumwa, Iowa.

About 1978, I and three other United Methodist pastors were approached by a staff member of the Iowa Methodist Hospital Foundation to clown at Raymond Blank Children's Hospital in Des Moines on April Fool's Day. We did a show for those who could come to the playroom and then we spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon calling in the children's hospital and some areas of Iowa Methodist and Younker's Rehabilitation Center. We spent the year in between our annual visits raising money in the churches of our various districts by doing clown shows and by having them observe a Raymond Blank Children's Hospital Sunday and receive a special offering. These monies were used for the playrooms and equipment for the new Blank Hospital that was being built at the time to replace the old one. Although the hospital construction ended in a few years, we continued clowning at the hospital for 20 years.

In my early years of clowning I was doing the Blank Children's Hospital gig along with occasional birthday parties, church family nights, Cub Scout Blue and Gold Banquets, parades, Mother Daughter and Father Son banquets. Because of church obligations, I was not able to attend Clown Camp at the University of Wisconsin, LaCrosse, until 1988, after having been clowning for 12 years.



Chuck Rinkel aka *Dr. Bugg*

Chuck was asked by a St. Paul, MN TV reporter, "Why are you attending Clown Camp" Itschuck replied, "Well, I decided that, after 12 years of clowning, it was high time I came to Clown Camp and learned what it is I'm supposed to be doing."

Clown Camp was certainly an eye opener and a tremendous experience. It was a mountain top experience with many high points of learning and insight. The two highest peaks that year however, were changes to Itschuck's costume that were worked out with Betty Cash and then Dorothy "Blab-i-gail" Miller's class on "The Caring Clown."

In the Fall of 1990, Itschuck attended a seminar on The Caring Clown, sponsored by The Clown Connection of St. Luke's Hospital in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Michael Christensen and Laine Barton of The Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit® of New York City, were the leaders. There were lectures, observation and then the clowns attending made visits under the observation of Christensen and Barton. This was followed by critique from the leaders.

Being retired, having the time and with the hospital experience of a pastor, I saw the Caring Clown as a possibility for me and Ottumwa Regional Health Center in Ottumwa, IA. As I drove home, Dr. Bugg, a tramp clown, was born. After designing the program, researching the costs, interviews and some turn downs, the Ottumwa Regional Health Foundation offered to underwrite the program. Insurance was obtained by Dr. Bugg and a contract was signed.

It was set up for three hours on three afternoons a week and one Saturday morning a month, 46 weeks a year. There was time allotted for continuing education and an expense fund for props and continuing education. During the six years of the program, at Dr. Bugg's request, the number of weeks went to 42 and in the third year the time was reduced to three hours a day, two days a week and one Saturday morning a month.

It was in January of 1991 that Dr. Bugg made his first rounds, calling in nearly all departments of the hospital. It didn't take long to discover that oftentimes the family and friends of the patient needed the visit from Dr. Bugg more than the patient.

More often than not, as he was leaving a surgery waiting room that had been quiet and tense, and now was chuckling, he heard the comment, "We needed that."

In June of 1991 I returned to Clown Camp, not as Itschuck, but as Dr. Bugg. Here I experienced Richard Snowberg's class on the Caring Clown for the first time. It was a positive experience to hear Snowberg affirming what Dr. Bugg had learned as he made rounds. This class, Snowberg's experiences and those of his students in the field, resulted in his book, *The Caring Clowns*, being published in May of 1992 -- the first book totally devoted to the field of the Caring Clown.

My stories of the early years sound rather primitive by today's standard's ten or twelve years later, but we were trail blazers entering a totally new territory.

Dr. Bugg's Rounds

Dr. Bugg made his rounds in a doctor's smock, wearing a stethoscope and carrying a doctor's medical bag. The stethoscope was the older model that had a hearing passage running all the way through it rather than the newer model that had a flat diaphragm on the end. With this older stethoscope, Dr. Bugg could blow bubbles.

In the pockets of his smock Dr. Bugg carried small close-up magic, IYQ stickers and small sight gags, such as, a diamond pin, which was a safety pin clipped through a hole in a dime.

The doctor's bag contained larger magic and sight gags, also the bottle of bubble solution. In the side pockets of the doctor's bag were hat tears and simple card tricks. Some of the items in the larger part of the bag were a stick that Rinkel had picked up in the yard. This was Dr. Bugg's "yard stick." There was also a "jack-in-the-box" clown that popped out of a colorful cloth-covered cone when the rod beneath it was pushed up. This item often calmed young children in their mother's arms, who were "concerned" about the clown. If not, Dr. Bugg quickly moved on. He did not invade the child's space nor let the person holding the child force Dr. Bugg into their space by bringing the child to him.

The "yard stick," which no one believed could be in the doctor's bag until Dr. Bugg showed it to them, and the "jack-in-the-box" clown, didn't quite fit into the doctor's bag, so one end of each was resting on one hinge of the opening to the bag. Sitting a straddle of these two items was a "trained" dog that barked, sat and flipped on Dr. Bugg's command. It didn't take long to learn the timing.

The dog was battery run and one of the lines in the patter was a question, "Do you know the hardest part about training this dog?" "Teaching me where the batteries go and where the switch is!"

Of all these, the favorite items were the "trained dog," the IYQ stickers, the stethoscope that Dr. Bugg used to blow bubbles, the mouth coil that Dr. Bugg pulled out of a person's ear and the hat tears. The older ladies particularly liked the hat tears. These all "worked" for child and adult alike. Dr. Bugg developed his own patter and handling for each of these.

Among the favorites were Dr. Bugg's songs and groaners. Patients, visitors and staff enjoyed singing along and trading groaners with him. There were several staff members who especially watched for him so that they could tell him their latest joke.

Working in a smaller, regional health center, where the clown is known by many in the community, is somewhat different, than working in a large specialty medical center. Yet, in many ways it is the same. In some instances Dr. Bugg's other personality, Chuck Rinkel, was known by the person being visited and they "knew" me right off. In other instances the person being visited wasn't sure just what they might be in for and it took a few moments to break through that uncertainty. In some cases it wasn't a matter of moments but a matter of several visits before a trusting relationship developed.

One day as Dr. Bugg checked in with Desi Payne, the Patient Coordinator. She told him of one patient who was having a very difficult time in adjusting to the hospital routine and accepting her situation. Desi thought that a visit from Dr. Bugg might relieve the tension somewhat.

Dr. Bugg knocked on her door and asked her permission to come in and visit. As he entered the room, this elderly woman began her complaints and there was not much to do but listen, it was her "show." About 10 minutes later, Dr. Bugg excused himself. On his next visit it was more of the same harangue.

The third visit started off the same way, but after about five minutes, she suddenly stopped her complaints and said, "What have you got in that bag?" Dr. Bugg responded, "I thought you'd never ask." He reached in the bag and brought out Spot, his "trained" dog. As Spot walked, sat and flipped on Dr. Bugg's command, the elderly woman chuckled. One thing led to another and before Dr. Bugg left the room she was laughing out loud.

From that moment on Dr. Bugg heard no more complaints. Not only that, but he was greeted with a smile and a cheerful "come on in" each time he knocked on the door. The staff reported a remarkable change in her attitude and bearing. The visits continued for the 4 or 5 weeks that she was in Extended Care.

Dr. Bugg carried a pager as he "made rounds." One afternoon it buzzed and Dr. Bugg called the operator to receive his message. The operator reported that there was a little girl in the emergency room, who was there to have some stitches removed and she wanted Dr. Bugg there while it was being done. So, Dr. Bugg quickly made his way to the emergency room and found the little girl sitting on a gurney with the doctor ready to take out the stitches. The "little girl" was the elderly patient who had so many complaints, when Dr. Bugg first visited her in Extended Care.

Upon questioning she 'fessed up that she had asked the nurse to tell Dr. Bugg that there was a "little girl" in emergency who needed him.

One afternoon as Dr. Bugg was coming out of the parking lot and crossing to the entrance of the hospital, he met two women coming out of the hospital. One of them was a little younger than the other. As he approached, the younger woman began to giggle, which of course was Dr. Bugg's invitation to interact with her. They stood there for sometime playing off each other, when Dr. Bugg noticed that her eyes were beginning to water. He changed his tone and said, "Things not going well upstairs?" She replied, "No, my husband committed suicide this morning." This led to more serious conversation about her situation and then she expressed guilt at having been laughing the same day that her husband had shot himself.

About that time a couple greeted her with a cheerful, "Well, hi Jane. We haven't seen you and Joe in months. How is everything going?" Jane then began another rehearsal of the events of the day. Dr. Bugg saw that she was in good hands and told her friend that if they needed him he could be paged and made his way on into the hospital.

At Ottumwa Regional Health Center, the pastors of churches in the county and retired pastors cooperated in sponsoring a program known as "On Call Chaplain." In this program a pastor or retired pastor carried a pager for a week at a time by which he could be paged, day or night, in case of death or emergency at the hospital.

Dr. Bugg was making rounds and wearing his pager for a dual purpose one week. He could be paged or Chuck Rinkel could be paged, as he was the On Call Chaplain. The pager buzzed and the On Call Chaplain was needed. There had been a death on the medical floor.

Chuck had wondered how he might handle such a situation if it should occur during his tour of duty as On Call Chaplain, but he hadn't arrived at any conclusions.

He arrived at the closed door of the patient's room, knocked and entered upon invitation. Immediately, there was hostility thrown at him from a son and his wife standing at the foot of the bed. "We don't need any "blank-ety-blank" clown in here! Our mother has just died!" Dr. Bugg explained that he was not coming as a clown, but as the On Call Chaplain.

Fortunately, at the same moment he noted a daughter and her husband standing at the head of the bed. The daughter saw him at the same time and exclaimed, "Oh, Chuck!" They had worked together for years in the local Cub Scouting program. The atmosphere in the room quickly changed and after sometime, as Dr. Bugg was walking out, the couple that was so hostile as he entered, thanked him profusely for coming. Not all visits are as dramatic as these noted above. At the same time no visit is routine.

Record Keeping

Dr. Bugg kept records of his visits by number, location and whether they were children, adults, patient, visitors or staff. At the bottom of the page he recorded notes on some of the calls he made. Here is a sampling of his notes, as quoted in Snowberg's book, page 105*.

"5/3 A sad note: Last Tuesday Alice died. She was the patient in Skilled Nursing with whom I sang. On Monday we had sung, Down By The Old Mill Stream, together. She was smiling as I walked out the door that day. The next day she died. Today there were several patients I visited that I just sat with them and held their hand. Therefore, I didn't see as many as usual.

"5/4 The first visit to X-Ray. Waiting I found parents and 2 boys. One was to have a C Scan of his head and he was afraid. I spent 10 to 15 minutes with them and walked down to the room with them. The second time I found a mother and friend of the 36 year old daughter who had just come in from Albia with a bad stroke. They were to fly her to Iowa City. I spent quite a bit of time with them.

"5/6 Saw a teenager and her mother waiting for an elevator to take them to Peds. Told her I would be up to see her before I left. I went up later and they were putting in an IV. I blew bubbles to take her mind off what they were doing because they were having a hard time with it. She started smiling.

"5/24 The folks from Minnesota are back. This time their married daughter had a disk removed, Before they were here for the granddaughter.

"Stopped by the surgery waiting room, which was really full this afternoon. As I leaned against the door jam, a lady started laughing hard. I started giving her a Jack Benny stare and she laughed all the harder. There must have been quite a bit of apprehension and tension in that room to set her off when she saw me. The others then laughed at her reaction. I did a few things for her and we all had a good time."

One of Dr. Bugg's most moving experiences started at about the same time as Dr. Bugg started making rounds and ended ten months later.

Angie was a 17 year old with terminal heart disease. That first day he called on her, the nurse at the desk had told him that she came in every so often and that he would be seeing more of her.

One of the times that she was in the hospital, the local newspaper was doing a story on the Dr. Bugg program and a reporter/photographer was following Dr. Bugg on rounds, taking notes and pictures. Angie and Dr. Bugg ended up on the front page of the Ottumwa Courier in full color. The notation under the picture reported Angie's age as 17. Several people questioned Chuck about this saying, "She looks more like a 10-year-old." This was true, as her heart condition had restrained her growth.



Angie and Dr. Bug - Printed with permission of The Ottumwa Courier



Over the months Angie and Dr. Bugg had built a close relationship. Each time he visited her, Dr. Bugg tried to have a new prop or "groaner joke" for her, but the closing of the visit soon came to be the same each time with Dr. Bugg singing, "Skinner mer rink tee dink tee dink, skinner mer rink tee do, I love youuuuu. Skinner mer rink tee dink tee dink, skinner mer rink tee do, deed I doooo. I love you in the morning and I love you in the night, I love you all the time, soooo evvvery things all right. Skinner mer rink tee dink tee dink, skinner mer rink tee do, I loooove youuuuu."

These visits of Angie and Dr. Bugg had been going on for about ten months, when Dr. Bugg entered the Peds section one day and saw a crowd gathered just inside the door. He made his way through and checked in at the Nursing Station.

"Something serious at the end of the hall," he asked? "Yes," the nurse replied, "Angie is here and she probably won't be going home."

Dr. Bugg worked the other patients on the floor and came to Angie's door. He greeted those standing in the hall and those gathered in the room across the hall before knocking on her door.

His knock was answered by Angie's grandmother, who immediately invited him in. As he entered the room, he saw that Angie was sleeping and he said, "Oh, she's asleep, I'll come back later." Grandmother responded, "No, stay and I'll wake her up, as she told us to wake her when you came."

As Dr. Bugg moved toward the bed Grandmother said, "Angie, Dr. Bugg is here." Angie opened her eyes and said, "Hi, Dr. Bugg," and gave him a weak smile.

As he crossed the room, Dr. Bugg saw Angie close her eyes. He crossed over to the far side of the bed, sat down and took hold of her hand. After sitting there 10 or 15 minutes, quietly holding her hand, Dr. Bugg said, "Well, Angie, I've gotta be going. Let's sing our song. She sang weakly with him, "Skinner mer rink tee dink..." When the song was finished she began to sing the first phrases of the song by herself, ending with, "I love you, Dr. Bugg." As he left the room, he saw her eyes were closed again and he wiped his own.

At that time Dr. Bugg was making visits every other day. However, as he was driving by the hospital the next day, something told him he needed to stop and visit Angie. So, Chuck Rinkel, stopped and went up to Peds. As he entered the hall, he saw that the family was much more solemn than the day before.

He checked in at the Nursing Station and his worst fears were confirmed, "She's unconscious, it probably won't be long now," the nurse reported.

As Chuck entered the room, he heard Angie's heavy, labored breathing and he said to her, "Hi Angie, its Dr. Bugg." There was no response, just the heavy breathing. He again went to the far side of the bed and quietly held her hand. After a while he said, "Well, Angie, let's sing our song."

While he sang alone, her breathing became quiet and soft. When he had finished, he walked to the door and turned to look at Angie one more time. Her breathing had returned to its heavy, labored pace.

An hour and a half later, Angie died.

For five years this is the column that Chuck wrote for COAI's Calliope. Following is one of the stories from the column,

Recently . . . I entered a waiting room and sat down across from a mother and her 4-year-old daughter. I did some bits and we visited. The mother said "She was in the hospital a year ago and you called on her . Do you remember?"

I responded "Well, I thought she looked familiar."

As we visited, the little girl came over to give me a hug. She crawled up in my lap, hugged me and then laid against my chest with her head on my shoulder and her arms wrapped around me for the next 10 minutes or so until the nurse called her name to see the doctor.

We just stat there quietly waiting. What greater reward can there be?

In 1997 Dr. Bugg retired and moved to Johnston, Iowa. He continued to clown once in a while, but did not try to establish a clowning business there. He did a few parades and shows each year for friends after moving to Johnston. Dr. Bugg will expire when his liability insurance expires in the spring of 2002.

For me Dr. Bugg's hospital clowning was a continuation of my years of ministry. While I did not minister as a pastor in clown, I was ministering to people who were hurting, not just patients but family, visitors and staff as well. Many new, close relationships were made and I was able to meet people at the point of their need, that I would have never met in my pastoring days. These memories and relationships will always be with me.

Following in some pretty BIG SHOES.

Dizzy the Clown aka Desi Payne began clowning at Ottumwa Regional Health Center a year ago.

"I used to work at the hospital where I met Dr. Bugg. I was a Patient Representative. I dealt with the public on a daily basis, handling problems or complaints which arose during a patient's stay. Dr. Bugg would check in with me every time he came in to the hospital. "Anybody you want me to see?" "Yes," I would reply, and send him to see cranky old patients. Then I would be surprised after he left that they weren't cranky any more. Wow! This clown is helping me out on my job! I was pretty amazed to the attraction Dr. Bugg had with kids that aged from 1 - 99 years of age.

"I attended a three-day Clown Camp on the Road in Des Moines, Iowa, sponsored by Korn Patch Klowns in 1995. From then on, I was hooked."