

The Happy Heartbeats – an Effort from the Heart



Top row from left: *Dr. Ivy Line*, Donna Knutsen; *Dr. Ann Stesia*, Rhoda Erbstein; *Dr. Sunshine*, Margaret Pujal; *Dr. Q.T. Pye*, Donna Skinner. Front row from left: *Dr. A. Ken Foote*, Dr. Bill Kelly; *Dr. Jell E. Bean*, Barbara Sapanara; and *Dr. Chick N. Pox*, Jack Erbstein.

The Happy Heartbeats is the clown care unit at the Tomorrow's Children's Institute for Cancer and Blood Disorders at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey (USA). The seven member group is a nonprofit organization with an exclusive contract at Hackensack University Medical Center.

Donna Skinner aka *Dr. Q.T. Pye* and Donna Knutsen, aka *Dr. Ivy Line*, started the group two years ago at the Institute for Cancer and Blood Disorders after discussing the program with a friend who works at the institute. After a six-month trial period they are now funded "privately" through the hospital.

Everyone in the group is a professional "community" clown and has had hospital clown training at Clown Camp and at Mooseburger Camp. The group was inspired by the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit® and are clown doctors.

There policy is to clown at the hospital in pairs. If one clown is sick and can't clown on a particular day someone else fills in. When one little girl declared "I'm not coming in unless the clowns are here" they decided to stagger their shift to Monday/Wednesday and Tuesday/Thursday.

They have plans to expand to pediatrics and other parts of the medical center.

Mission Statement

"The Happy Heartbeats" is a group of professional entertainers posing as 'Clown Doctors.' The purpose of this group is to brighten the day for hospitalized patients, their families, friends and caregivers. This is done through humor, as humor has been proven to be both a powerful and effective form of medicine. A smile helps reduce stress and calm apprehension in the patient.

Concept

Using medically related and traditional routines, the "Clown Doctors" will act to relieve some of the anxiety experienced during treatment.

The "Clown Doctors" remind visitors and others that there is a healthy part of the patient that also needs treatment: humor and fun are the best prescriptions for this. Hospital personnel and other caregivers are continually exposed to stressful life and death situations. "Clown Doctors" by their antics will give these people a chance to "lighten up" and celebrate the life portion of their jobs.

Visits are tailored to the patient's ability to enjoy what is happening. The "Clown Doctors" will be just as willing to sit quietly, hold a hand and listen, as they will be to tell a joke or perform a skit. It's all healthy clowning for patients.

There are not a lot of words in their story, but you can just gather from the pictures on the following pages the sort of group cohesion The Happy Heartbeats have.

It sounds like they have so much fun as a group that it makes Shobi wishes she lived in New Jersey again, so she could join them.

The Executive Director of the Medical Center says *"They absolutely love our kids and are so wonderful to them. They've become regular fixtures here."* To the right: *Dr. Q.T. Pye* (Donna Skinner) and *Dr. Ivy Line* (Donna Knutsen) hug a child.



"The Happy Heartbeats" have many, many touching stories since we were formed two years ago, but one in particular stands out in all of our minds." From Donna Knutsen and Donna Skinner.

"It all started in April 2000 when a 9 year old girl Allison was diagnosed with a brain tumor. We met Allison in the playroom of Tomorrow's Children's Institute following her surgery and at the beginning of a very long road filled with chemotherapy etc.

"We immediately fell in love with Allison....her huge dimples and warm smile could light up a room. Her parents were thrilled that we were around to cheer her up once the treatments started and her little smile started to dim.

"Allison would always wink at us - it was her special little signal. - one day two of us went into her room and she was asleep...we told her mom that we would just leave her some stickers and toys and that she should tell Allison that we were there and that we were thinking of her. Her mom's response surprised us - she said "I must wake her up to see you - if she finds out that you were here and I didn't wake her - there would be hell to pay". With this, she woke Allison up and she opened her little eyes looked at us and just winked - and fell immediately back to sleep - Her mom said believe it or not that was enough - just seeing us made Allison happy even if it was for a split second.

Another day one of the clowns was painting Allison's face and he asked her if he could connect all the freckles and see what shape they would get....the next time she said "I want my clown name to be *Dr. Dimples.*"

Then there was the day that Allison was coming into the clinic for a spinal tap . . . the only way her parents got her there was to tell her that the clowns were going to be there on that day. After the spinal tap, she had to stay perfectly still. She asked if we could come in and paint her - we painted her legs, knees, hands, arms, cheeks, forehead, and even her belly. Boy! was she happy and so were we.



Dr. Dimples to the right and above cuts her birthday cake

Months had passed and Allison's visits to the hospital were less frequent. Two of us were sitting in the playroom and in walked Allison - in a lab coat that had "THE HAPPY HALF-BEAT" on one lapel and "DR. DIMPLES" on the other.....we can't even explain the emotions that ran through us when we saw her.....

For her 10th birthday in September "The Happy Heartbeats" bought her clown accessories for her outfit such as clown earrings, clown nose, funny hat, etc. But what she really wanted was "real clown shoes". The cost of these shoes approximately \$200 was beyond the budget of "The Happy Heartbeats" It was then that Harold Knutsen - the husband of Dr. Ivy Line - told the story to his Rotary Club. Without hesitation, they voted to purchase the shoes as a Christmas present for Allison. Allison and her family were invited to the Rotary Club luncheon and we presented Allison with her very own clown shoes in her favorite colors.... the jubilant look on Allison's face is one that the Rotarians and "The Happy Heartbeats" would never forget.



Ana Maria, Bella O'Lovely (see page 20) and Dr. Ivy Line

From Dr. Chick N Pox (aka) Jack Erbstein

In the past two years I have come in contact with many children who touch my emotions. I want to tell you about a young girl who has crept into my heart. Ana Maria is her name, and she comes from a far away place, Puerto Rico. When we first met, anything I did for her brought a negative reply - finally one day I turned to her and said, " For an 11 year old - you have such a negative attitude." She looked me right in the eye and said, "I'm not 11" and giggled. "I'm 16." Then she wanted to know my age - she teases me and I tease her.

She loves to create things and took the time to make a pin of a clown out of clay for me which I always wear . We give little gifts to each other, but the greatest gift is my being able, if only for a few minutes to bring her a smile and a little joy into her day - that is my main reason for being a member of the Happy Heartbeats.

From *Dr Anna Stesia*, aka Rhoda Erbstein

I am Dr. Anna Stesia, but I do not put anyone to sleep. There are so many children we spend time with, I remember a little girl named Erin. Erin would see children in the play room, look in and as soon as someone would acknowledge her she would turn her head and leave. For many months she did this and I wondered how could I reach out to her. On one of these days I just sat down on a little chair and began telling a story, a story about a little caterpillar who thought no one liked her because she was different. It was the first time in months that Erin sat down close by and just listened. The nurses on staff could not believe she did that - she did not say a word when it was over and left abruptly. The next time I was there and Erin came in I sat down and kind of sniffled a little which sparked her attention - "I feel so sad," I said, "I do face painting for everyone and no one here ever does anything for me. Do you paint ?" I asked and she shook her head, "Yes". "Oh how great! Would you paint something on me? Pleeaesee," I asked. To the surprise of everyone she sat down with me and looked at the paints and started to paint a picture on my hand then my other hand and then my face. We laughed and connected and she now pops in and tells me about things she does and where she goes, and has a bright smile whenever we see each other.

It is so rewarding to be a member of this wonderful group--The Happy Heartbeats - to have the opportunity to touch someone's funnybone and to make their day a joyful remembrance, and to feel What A Great Day!

Dr. William H. Kelley, D.P.M. aka *Dr. A. Ken Foote* He is a retired podiatrist.

One time, a little boy on his first visit and scared out of his wits wouldn't cooperate with anyone or leave his fathers arms. That is, until they introduced him to 6 foot 2 inch me!

I promptly shrank in size by going to my knees. I took out my Jelly Bean Can (a can that looks to be full of Jelly Beans but when you open it spring snakes fly out) It was introduced and suddenly we were buddies who were out to shock the whole hospital with our snakes. When it came time for him to go for his MRI, he wasn't going anywhere without his clown who willingly went along. We "jelly beaned" all who were in the room. Then while Mon and Dad talked to the staff, we went out in the hall and "jelly beaned" everyone who came past. We stayed together until it was time for his anesthesia. His Mom and I held him until the anesthesia took effect and he went to sleep. He knew that I would be gone when he awoke. We certainly did have fun that day.

I consider it wonderful that when doctors see us playing with a child and his or her family, they actually don't want to interrupt. They leave and come back later!

The Happy Heart Beats can be reached at dollyclown@aol.com



Angels in Clown Clothes

Today I went to the doctor's office,
But I was not the least bit afraid,
Because funny clowns from Happy Heartbeats
Were there and we played.

The clowns visit the hospital and clinic,
To cheer up kids like me,
Kids who need special medicines
That are called chemotherapy.

These funny clowns
Wear white hospital gowns.
Each clown also wears a funny nose
And funny shoes covering funny, clown toes.

But the most special thing
The clowns wear, I'm told
Is a great big shining
Heart of gold.

The clowns all have funny names
Like Drs. Sunshine and Anna Stesia
They'll play any game that you want
'Cause they just wants to please ya.'

The only thing contagious
About Dr. Chick N Pox,
Is a serious case of the giggles
When he tries to juggle blocks.

Dr. A. Ken Foot wears the biggest shoes
On a pair of the biggest feet,
Drs. Q.T. Pye, Ivy Line and Jell E. Bean
Are the sweetest clowns you could ever meet.

The clowns tell funny jokes
And have silly toys,
They also play games,
With the girls and boys.

The clowns let my baby brother
Help them do a trick or two
My brother helped make magic
By saying "Abracadabra do."

Today a clown painted a butterfly on my face,
On my brother's hand, a pig..
I am sure glad that these clowns
Are working my doctor's gig.

But the best thing that the clowns do
Is making me forget why I'm here.
The clowns put a smile in my heart
As I know how much they care.

Mom thinks that they are special too.
She hopes that through this prose,
You will see that they are really angels,
Wearing clown clothes.

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(A young patient and her mother)