

Doc Geezer

aka Joe Barney

An Interview by Arne Swensen

Like so many facets on a diamond Joe sparkles with joy and fun, love, optimism and outrageousness. In his most civilian persona, he still manages to evoke a smile.

As I stood with Joe at Mooseburger Camp this summer, waiting for the bus to whisk away the recently matriculated clowns to the airport, I noticed that even at high noon, his shadow was formidable in its circumference. Joe is a regular feature of the Mooseburger Clown Arts program and teaches the segment on hospital clowning.

As a man of substantial stature, Joe uses his girth to distinct advantage in character as "DOC GEEZER." You see, Doc Geezer has a waist size that is so significant, he cannot see below its perimeter. Therefore he heads off to work unable to notice that he forgot to wear pants. Fortunately, when he arrives on station, sans pants, he nevertheless wears a brightly colored and decorative undergarment (boxers, not briefs) and an air of confidence that belies his predicament.

The badge around his neck pronounces him the "Director of Fartiology." He loves to ride the elevators and pass artificial gas while blaming the other doctors on board. "Puleezze doctor, have you no manners?", he barks.

Joe first suited up for hospital clowning when he became "Stupidvisor" for the Big Apple Circus Caring Clown Unit at Yale-New Haven Children's hospital unit, a little more than five years ago. He knew Michael Christiansen, one of the founders of Big Apple. They had been friends for years and one day Michael called Joe to ask him to help get things started at the hospital. They recruited 40 people in the area to audition. Joe was also required to audition.

Joe has been a clown since he was five years old. Both of his grandfathers were in Vaudeville. "My grandfather was four feet tall. My grandmother was six feet three inches tall. They were a comedy team. Both my Uncles were over six feet tall. When my Uncles would fight, my Grandpa would try to break it up. My Uncles would pick him up and put him on the refrigerator. One day he was up there all day long until my Grandmother came home to take him down."

Joe's father was in the funeral business. Joe feels it helped him learn about sensitivity, thus preparing him for work as a hospital clown.

He did his first shows when he was eleven years old. Among his credits are: Boss Clown for Macy's Thanks-



giving Day Parade; appearances at Caesar's Palace; the Eastern States Exposition; the Today Show; Good Morning America; and, Entertainment Tonight. He has appeared in Time and People Magazine.

Seven years ago he decided to clown full time. After setting up a production company in Connecticut to do parties and special events, he concentrates those efforts in the Connecticut and New York City area.

Joe's clowning has diversity. For instance, he has been doing holiday Santa Claus work for years. He shared this story with Shobi in a recent email

This Christmas I got a call from a distraught mother. It seems her twin seven-year-old boys hunted through the house until they found all the presents that were hidden. They then proclaimed to the rest of the house "There is no Santa because we found all the presents. He doesn't bring them on Christmas eve."

Well, Mom needed some help, so a few days later, the boys were called to the principal's office at their school. When they arrived they found the principal sitting outside her office. The principal said "You're not here to see me, someone in my office wants to see you."

When they came in, I was there as Santa Claus with full face and beard, but not in a Santa suit. I was in a business suit. The boys' eyes widened and I said "Sit down boys we need to talk." I asked them whether they found what they were looking for, and they stammered, "What do you mean Santa?" I told them, "The Jig is up, I know you found the presents."

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After an awkward moment they admitted "We went looking for the presents, 'cause some of our friends said Santa's not real." So I said, "Just this once, I'll leave the presents there because you know, if Santa's presents are found they normally go back to the North Pole."

"Thank you, thank you!" they said excitedly, and added "We're really sorry. We'll never look again."

I warned them, "If I hear any bad reports, I will have to bring you just socks and underwear." I gave them hugs and said "Go on back to class." They backed out of the office and closed the door quietly. Then with shrieks, they ran down the hall screaming "He's real. He's Real. He really is real!"

Amazing what a little faith will do, I'm a firm believer that a little bit of Santa lives in all of us, and all you gotta do is believe.

During the week at Mooseburger Camp, Joe was kind enough to take a few minutes to answer questions about hospital clowning.

Joe, How do you see that hospital clowning differs from regular clowning?

"As a clown we perform for people. In a hospital, we play with people. When I clown in a hospital, I look for more of the human quality, more of the human interaction. When I'm presenting a trick, or a gag, I involve the patient in what I do. I read them to see if they are accepting what I am doing. I read the audience more, make them a part of the action."

What do you look for in a hospital clown?

"I hold open auditions and ask the people to come without makeup or costume. I want to see how they handle the performance. Like the Big Apple Circus, I ask them to give me five minutes of their best stuff.

"The auditions are tough. I'm not kidding. They want five minutes of your best stuff, and I've seen performance with everything under the sun, everything. We had one little old lady that spoke gibberish for five minutes. And we just sat there [deadpan], not believing what we were seeing. Another guy, a child of the 60's, came in and did a magic routine. He took a diaper and pretended it was a soiled diaper. He used a big change bag. He put the diaper in the bag and produced a Dove. He put the Dove on his shoulder and using a small hand device he squeezed, the Dove appeared to poop on his shirt. Needless to say, he wasn't hired.

"I'm a firm believer that the auditions really work. I tell people when they come to work for me, 'I don't care if you can juggle, I don't care if you can do magic, what I'm looking for is a clown heart. Are you happy? Are you energetic? Are you ready to be open with your heart?'"

"You don't have to be the funniest clown on the face of the earth to work in a hospital. People will say, 'Oh, I'm not funny.' I say, 'Everybody is funny, just in different degrees.'"

What do you see for the future of hospital clowning?

"I see hospital clowning growing in leaps and bounds. I have been down in Sarasota, Florida working with Circus Sarasota in their program called, *Laughter Unlimited*. Circus Sarasota is separate

from the Big Apple Circus. We just started one of the first nationally recognized programs in a geriatric hospital in Florida.

"A lot of those people in geriatric hospitals are forgotten. They go into nursing homes and assisted living residences and they don't have the entertainment they are used to."

Going from a pediatric hospital to a geriatric hospital, Joe found it shocking to find situations where people are awakened at five in the morning and put to bed at five thirty in the afternoon because there is no one to care for them in the evening.

"So what *Laughter Unlimited* is trying to do is to make their lives as pleasant as possible, to bring in some fun. A lot of geriatric hospitals are short of staff which really hurts the patients. When health care gets so pushed to service everybody, they lose the human touch. They don't take the time to ask about the grandchildren or, to say 'gee, your hair looks pretty today.'"

Joe left the Big Apple Circus about two and a half years ago to become the COAI Artist in Residence specializing in hospital clowning. "They [COAI] requested that I teach hospital clowning in different venues. I traveled around trying to share the insights of hospital clowning to hospitals that can't afford the big professional programs.

"In the beginning of 2001, Circus Sarasota came to me and asked me if I would put this program together with them. It was to be a satellite program. When the program development was completed in July, it was announced that funding, which would endow the program long into the future, was complete. So Circus Sarasota asked me to become Director of *Laughter Unlimited*. Now, I take the hospital clowns' message up and down the coast of Florida from Miami to Jacksonville."

How do you view Volunteer Programs?

"Personally, I would do this for free, if I could afford to. But unfortunately, I have a family to support.

"I feel that when you volunteer for an organization, that organization should make some type of contribution: provide your give-aways, buy the volunteers lunch, provide parking. The old saying goes, 'If it costs nothing, it must be worth nothing.' I find that changes. When some people see a clown in the hospital they say, 'Oh, isn't that cute.' But when we go in and touch people, we really get them to bond with the clown, they become a living, breathing part of the hospital.

"These people, administrators, all of a sudden wake up. and see there is a therapeutic need for this. We found out when we were in Florida that people did not realize the impact we have as clowns on people.

"We found some people had given up the will to live. We visited people five hours a day, three days a week. And all of a sudden they had a reason to live. They had someone visit. They began to comb their hair and wash their face. We had two ladies who because of this program, started eating again and everything else because they had a reason to keep going. They weren't just looking for a smile.

"We have seen health care personnel that have written us in as prescriptions for these people on the geriatric wards.



Joe Barney in his stage makeup.

Compare this to his hospital clown makeup on Page 16.

“We work with dementia and Alzheimer patients to get them to grasp any piece of their past. Anything we can get them to remember is a good piece of work. It makes them grasp the last little piece of memory they may have had left.

“Activity carts are used in geriatric hospitals. We teach them how to make balloon animals. It allows them to use their hands to twist balloons and to squeeze the hand pump to blow up the balloons. This gets a lot of support from the Foundations because the patients are arthritic and the hand motions help them.”

Do you find that hospital administrators are more receptive today?

“Oh yes. There are very few that haven’t heard of the work of Patch Adams since the movie, and it has become more and more acceptable. Ten years ago, you would have been laughed at. Even Big Apple circus ten years ago was scratching to get into hospitals. Now they can’t keep up with the requests.”

Do you think a hospital clown association would be worthwhile?

“I definitely think it would be worthwhile. I see a lot of different hospital clowns across the country and everyone has a little different style and not necessarily right or wrong, but I think everyone should be on the same page when it comes to hygiene, rules.”

What do you think about a certification process for hospital clowns that would be developed by the association?

“I think it’s a good idea, particularly when you are going to a hospital to present a start up program. It would be good to be able to say what and where you have been trained.

“I get calls to go out and teach people who already do this work and also I go into the units themselves and help start the work.

Where do you see vulnerability in the hospital clown movement?

“Lack of professionalism is one of our biggest vulnerable spots. Too many people jumping in before they know what they are doing. Every time I teach, I hear someone say ‘I have a few minutes left after my party so I think I’ll go over and visit the hospital.’ No! No! I’m a firm believer that this shouldn’t be an after thought. If you’re going to do it, then do it for real.

“Definitely, lack of professionalism. They have no idea that they could get into a life and death situation which needs to be handled with kid gloves.”

Do you think therapeutic clowns need a certain level of education?

“Yes, I do think that’s a need. Not a college degree, but a certain level of education in handling themselves in that situation, a certain level of hygiene, proper protocol. Every hospital is different and you must develop an awareness of how that hospital runs.

“I tell everyone, take the volunteer orientation programs. They teach the ‘whys and wherefores’ of the way the hospital operates, where things are, and what to do in emergency. People want to become a clown and put their common sense three steps back. In a hospital, clowns need to put their common sense three steps forward. You always need to apply common sense before you begin to do bits in a hospital.”

When you go to sell a program to a hospital, do you first go to the administration?

“Lots of times the hospital comes to us! They heard from newspaper articles, etc. Sometimes we have a contact through someone we know. We do very few cold calls. Write to volunteer departments or to the Child Life Directors first. Get articles from The New York Times that speak to the therapeutic value of laughter -- that show the value of humor in healing; get articles from Patch Adams, and the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Units.® Make copies of these articles and put them with your letter so they know you mean business. Let them know that you really want to do this and you know the ramifications of what we do.

“I tell clowns never to go in clown the first time. Stress professionalism from the beginning by dressing in a nice suit or dress. Unfortunately, we live in a world where clown is a four letter word. They still bash clowns. ‘Quit clowning around’ has a negative connotation. Once you get in a hospital and show what you can do, there’s very little negative connotation after that.”

Finally, do you have anything to say to aspiring hospital clowns?

“What I’d like to say is follow your heart. Your heart will guide you through this program.

“I’m a believer that God made clowns, you don’t make yourself a clown. God made clowns. Everybody needs a little bit of fertilizer

to get that clown heart working and make that heart grow once it starts to percolate. Once it starts to grow, it's tough to keep it away; it's tough to stop it. Follow your heart and if it brings you to a hospital then that's where you are going with it.

"I've had so many people tell me 'I've been a birthday party clown. I've done this or that.' I was a clown for years and years and years in many venues -- circus, amusement park, stage, theme park, you name it. And it was fun, it was great. I enjoyed making people laugh. But until I went into the hospital and worked on a one to one basis with a kid or with a geriatric, I never realized the amount of personal gratification I got from clowning.

"So, all the money in the world can't be enough to compare with the feeling I get when I walk into those hospitals. It's just wonderful, and it's changed my life. It's changed how I treat my own kids.

"I'm thankful every day that they're breathing and they're healthy and they're happy. I've had my own kids become sick. I wish I had started hospital clowning a long time ago."

During his course on hospital clowning at Mooseburger Camp, Joe related many inspirational and fun stories of times with patients in the hospitals. It's no wonder his upper torso resembles a baseball umpire wearing a huge chest protector. It takes a lot of room to house a heart the size of Joe Barney's heart.

-- Arne Swensen

Arne Swensen is the Founding Director of The Foundation for Therapeutic Clowning, 6986 E. Soaring Eagle Way, Scottsdale AZ 86262. He clowns in the Phoenix Area as Dr. Laffngiggl and is one of the most enthusiastic hospital clowns Shobi has had the pleasure of clowning with.
