



Caring Clowns at Ground Zero

*Carol Chesney and
Claudia Boerst*

We've been doing a lot of Caring Clowning down at the Family Disaster Centers in NYC, since November. We go down once a week to gently lift the spirits of the many volunteers, staff members and victims.

As we arrive at the 6 month anniversary of 9/11, people are getting more stressed out, and very sad. The reality is setting in now, and people are in all stages of grief.

Claudia Boerst (top) and Carol Chesney (below)



Right now, we are going to two different centers. The thousands of people that go there have lost their homes, or jobs, or businesses due to 9/11. They all need financial assistance. (Those who lost family members are now going to another site. We will be going there within a couple of weeks, too.) Because of the huge number of people needing assistance, they need to get there early in the morning to get a number to be seen, and then usually have to wait a long time. One of the centers actually has a waiting room in another building.

We have given out over 500 stickers each time we go in. We do some magic for the larger groups. If we are in a particularly busy area, we sometimes have to do it in silence! But the people really enjoy the colorful fun. We also rub a lot of backs, hold a lot of hands, and listen to a lot of stories. It is often heart wrenching to listen to a story, and then have to continue on with "our" work, that of trying to lift spirits amidst such pain.

But it works! The volunteers and staff members are SO BUSY, that most times we quietly go over and offer a sticker to them and they will look up and smile... and thank us for coming! If they are with a client, they will often smile too, which is a simple thing, but so needed. Often one of the workers will run over to us to tell us of someone to see. Every time we go, people will come up to us and say "Thanks for coming, we really need you today. We could have used you yesterday too."

When we started going down in November, we were going to Pier 94, which was a much larger area. They had Therapy Dogs there every day. It is amazing to watch the healing work that they do! Since they moved the Assistance Center to a few different locations, there isn't enough room for the dogs. Three weeks ago, we started bringing puppets. We have a large Sheepdog puppet (Emily) that everyone fell in love with. They kept saying that they missed the Therapy Dogs. This past Wednesday we didn't bring her (she's big and hard to manage on the train and subways - and to make matters worse, she doesn't know that she is just a puppet!) But when we got to the Assistance Centers, everyone kept asking where Emily was! So we went and bought an adorable, large St. Bernard puppet yesterday! That way we'll each have a dog to bring around. Puppet animals are great because they speak all languages!

So far, Metro North conductors have been very kind about not asking us to pay. We've only had to pay for a train in or out a few times. We don't expect a free ride, but it has helped - a lot! We almost always have to pay for the subways. We give out stickers and candy each time we go in. We found a really big weekly medicine holder, and put candy kisses or peanut M & M's in. Then, we offer people their daily vitamin! It's fun to watch their faces when they tell us that they already had their vitamin, and we tell them that ours are better and offer them the candy! One conductor, in particular, on the way home comes and sits with us for a couple of minutes when he can, and gets excited when we give him a dozen or so M&M's!

While most of us are trying to "get back to normal" there are many people who just can't. We would like to be able to go to the Disaster Centers as long as there is a need and would appreciate any help that you might be able to give us. We both feel so blessed that we are able to do something to help those directly involved with 9/11. We just need a little help so that we can continue to do it.

Anyone who wishes to contribute to Claudia and Carol's efforts may do so through Clowns on Rounds, Inc., PO Box 6364, Albany, NY 12206

We all can't go to New York, but we can bring our love and joy to everyone in our community. The next time you go shopping pop into a modified clown outfit, put on your red nose and cheer up your community! The cheer goes both ways. The above buttons will be available at the COAI Convention in New York.