

Clowns R Us:

By Thelma (Happy) Miller



The Retired and Volunteer Senior Program (RSVP) for 31 years has evolved to meet the needs of older Americans, 55 and over to continue in purposeful, meaningful activities and to give them the opportunity to give something back to the community they live in. There are over 760 programs in existence presently, all over the United States including the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. RSVP recognizes that the older American is a fit and energetic individual who, having a lifetime of experience, can bring his/ her expertise and creativity to enrich the lives of those they help, as well as their own lives. It is Federally funded by the Corporation for National and Community Services, the United Way as well as other community based companies.

The Rockland County RSVP is one of thirty-eight RSVP's in New York State. Its mission is to find meaningful and ongoing volunteer opportunities for it's senior population. According to Acting Director Sean Crawford, volunteers serve 147 site agencies that are non-profit or not for profit agencies. Four to forty hours a week are given to programs such as tutoring, teaching adults how to read, phone contact between a volunteer and a child whose parents work, to the West Nile Virus Abatement Program, the RSVP Speakers bureau and the ground water Safety Program.

Another special program, The Clowns R Us troupe was established almost six years ago. A volunteer there asked the Director at the time, Brenda Greenberg, why Rockland did not have clowns when nearby Bergen County RSVP did? Ms. Greenberg felt it was an excellent idea. RSVP already had many sites where it would be appropriate for clowns to visit. There are two hospitals, a rehabilitation hospital, several nursing homes, senior day care centers, an inter generational site and a day treatment center for the mentally challenged. Why not? A small ad was placed in the local newspapers, she and Sean Crawford, the Assistant Director interviewed the original fourteen people who answered the ad. All the notice said was that a clown troupe was starting. Anyone interested could call the phone number given. Training was free.

I answered the ad, thinking if I didn't like it, I could always drop out. What a surprise! Somewhere, in the covert reaches of my

furthest being there must have always been that clown waiting to get out. Clown training was loosely organized at first, given by the trainers from the Bergen County clowns. Two weeks after joining, I was asked to do my first gig. Asked why me, I was told I was most ready.

That was the beginning. As the troupe grew and more people came into our group, I realized that we would have to start our own training program. I went to my directors and they said it was a good idea. I wrote the program and with the help of a few of the more experienced clowns in our group, we held our first class of five students. That was the beginning. Since we have such a diversified group of clown volunteers as well as different kinds of sites, the training program had to fit all of the sites. Included is special emphasis on clowning in hospitals and nursing homes as well as the issues around infection control and appropriate clown behavior to grieving and depressed patients and their families. These are considered walk arounds. The senior centers prefer clown shows. This is also addressed in the training program. Naomi (Bubbles) Bentley said "There is enough differences in the types of clowning we do to have everybody choose what they are comfortable in doing. If people are comfortable and like what they do, they will stay."

I am always mystified and amazed that whenever a new project suggests itself, the challenge is like a siren's call. First was the opportunity to go to China and clown with Patch Adams. In our small corner of the world, I never would have had the chance if I were not a clown. Then we ran a pilot project to train children at risk. Our first class was a group of ten girls from the parents of alcoholics. Their counselor kept talking about teaching them to draw outside the lines. It didn't matter whether the girls could actually clown. The program was designed to give them an opportunity to increase their self-esteem and to encourage socialization and teamwork. It was so successful that it led to a grant. We continued with additional programs for children at risk in the inner cities and for children who had behavior and attention span problems.

In the fall of last year I got a call from one of the clowns who also went to China. Maureen (Oochie) Mould asked if I would work in the New York area to organize a trip to Ground Zero. Five of the clowns that went to China with me would come to join some of our RSVP clowns. There was enough room in my house to put up all the out of town clowns.. A RSVP clown, Marty (Sassy) Sasin arranged for a donation of bus transportation by the Chestnut Ridge School Bus Transportation Company for all of us to make the trips to New York City.

The trip to Ground Zero was an experience of a lifetime. We met Policemen, Rescue workers and Firefighters in that area as well as shopkeepers. All of them were so appreciative and grateful to see us. I never felt as a clown more needed or therapeutic. When we left, we left lots of red noses and a million smiles behind for the people who needed it most. [This trip was covered in depth in the Hospital Clown Newsletter, Vol. 6 No. 4]

Most recently, I saw the need for a program to address pre-schoolers afraid of clowns. (We have an intergenerational site where both seniors and preschool children come to the same center). With the full cooperation of the intergenerational program and the RSVP clown program, I started the program. It was a delightful and rewarding time. Now when the clowns come in to perform monthly, the children sit and enjoy. No more tears.

So how is the Clowns R Us different than other clown troupes? Mr. Crawford said "We knew we had to do things differently with the clowns. We recognized these people would not be happy answering the phone or stuffing envelopes. From the beginning, we worked closely with the sites who asked for the clowns and with the clowns as well. The clowns proved that what we were doing worked. They come in, attend meetings, commit to the gigs they are going to do, and then they do them. Their participation is a great deal higher than in any other program we have".

Ms Greenberg added, "People involved in the clown program are people who have an innate empathy for those who are emotionally and physically vulnerable. The longer the clown volunteers, the more they realize that they get back much more than they give".

Something else happened that no one expected. With the visibility of the RSVP clowns, suddenly, all of RSVP became more visible. Clowns R Us was featured in the local papers whenever there was a special event. (We are a very colorful group and we make good copy in the newspapers.) The legislators and Rockland Community College, our sponsoring agency began to notice us and the valuable work we did. People in the community began to understand that laughter and humor is beneficial to everyone, but particularly to the audiences Clowns R us reach. It is fast becoming recognized as alternative form of medicine. Both Ms. Greenberg and Mr. Crawford made sure that the Clowns R Us troupe knew we were appreciated and always were there to listen to our concerns and ideas. They support us in everything we do. Further, they realized, clowning is expensive. That is why we have the opportunity to earn money as clowns for non-sites and the money is kept in a special account to be used exclusively for clown supplies, props, magic tricks, and learning aids.

In reflecting on why members stay, I asked other members. The common thread was that there is a sense of caring about each other. An outstanding example was having a 91-year old woman say she always wanted to be a clown her whole life and wanted to come into our training program. Margaret (Melodie) Wheeler had been a lawyer and after retirement, continued to volunteer her legal

services. She was a very active, albeit somewhat frail 91 year old. She was included in the training program. She never missed a lesson. She made her own costume, and since she couldn't get a sewing machine, she sewed it by hand. More interesting was seeing how the other clowns and trainees treated her. Clowns remained in the background but eased her way so she was able to clown to the best of her ability. When she did a gig, two others always volunteered to go with her to help her with her make up and transportation. I think we all felt pride in her accomplishments as a clown. The following year, Margaret went to visit her niece somewhere down south and had a fatal heart attack. We can all learn from Margaret. She lived her life to the fullest and never let anything stand in the way of doing what she felt was important to her.

We have group functions we participate in as well as the sites where we do our walk-arounds or shows. Annually, we join the Nyack Halloween Parade, the biggest in our county. We go as a group to the Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Circus. The best part of the circus is coming early so that we can watch the clowns put on their make up and answer all our questions. It's an opportunity to see professional clowns up close and personal. We also have an annual get together with our spouses. It can be a dessert party but our all time host Sally (Simcha) Winters says, "It's more important that we are there together in a different setting. The food part isn't important". We have a listing of 42 clowns and 10 more people waiting for our next training program to start. Together, we donate an average of 375 hours a month. Irene (Honeybee) Rubin felt being a clown in this setting goes beyond her expectations. Besides the support of the administration and the other members, she says she can never get over the feeling of when she walks into a hospital or nursing home room. The people are all alone, sitting there with this dull look in their eyes until my entrance. They their eyes light up and they smile. "They make me feel ten feet tall". Ivan (Spats) Jensen said, "I find our group is open and accepting. We all have the same goal of helping people who need smiles and cheering up. We work as a team. There are no stars or prima donnas. Everyone is a star".



With the encouragement and support of our administrators and of RSVP, the Clowns R Us troupe is always available to go into places where smiles, laughter, caring and even love is needed. We make a big difference in people's lives and we enjoy what we do along the way. Having a common cause and an umbrella of support makes it easy for us to stay.

Sean Crawford, Acting Director, has agreed to help anyone interested in finding a RSVP near him or her or in starting their own clown troupe. Just call the Rockland RSVP at (845) 356-6818 or email him at scrawfor@sunyrockland.org.

If anyone would like to talk to Thelma/Happy about any aspect of clowning as a RSVP clown, contact her at (201) 750-9526.