

# Clowns of Hope

## Clowns Revisit Ground Zero in NYC



From September 6 - 9, 2002 fourteen clowns from around the USA visited seven fire stations, NYU Hospital near the World Trade Center, on the streets in lower Manhattan and some clowns went to a couple of churches on Sunday morning. Maureen *Oochee* Mould from Yakima, Washington organized and led the trip. Others clowns participating were Paul Beals, Tammy Danforth, Bev Engleman, Wes Flener, Connie Coble-Roe, Margaret Decio, Shirley Gorrell, Molly Petersen, Pat Pierce, Linda Sweig, Tim Thor, Pauline Walker, and Dionetta Hudzinski.

These were comments from TV: "On September 11, a woman being interviewed on the news was saying that she wasn't sure how she was going to make it through the day. But a couple of days before, she ran into some clowns and they gave her hope.

"While at church, an older woman came up to me and told me that she was watching the news on Sept 11 and a NYC firefighter was being interviewed. He said that the clowns had been there and they saved his life.

### **Thoughts from Linda Sweig Clown Dode, Chicago, Illinois:**

"People were very glad we were there. It's a tough time for New York City. 9/11/01 is far from over for them. They are working to put their lives back together and to heal.

"My husband and I visited New York City about 5 months before the attack and stayed at the Marriott Hotel right near the World Trade Center. We use to go to the towers to eat breakfast. Seeing the site was very moving to me.

"There's a wall where people from all over the United States and all over the world have sent messages of love and support. On the wall I saw a sign written by a child that said, 'I love you Daddy.' Watching the events of 9/11/01 on television was very different than being with the people who were there. It was a powerful experience."

### **From Pauline "Daffy Daffodil" Walker of Seminole, Florida**

"The trip to NYC was one I'll never forget. It was wonderful meeting the clowns from all over the country. What a great bunch of people! Being a part of the Clowns of Hope Tour was/is Very special to me.

"I'll always remember the surprised looks and smiles of the firemen we met, the smiles of the policemen we met, and all the thanks we received from the people of New York City. There are so many wonderful memories, but here are a couple of events they really stand out in my memory.

"A fire chief stopped his fire truck in the street and ran to get his camera to take our pictures! He was so excited that we had come back to visit. While we were clowning at his station, another fire truck from another station parked across the street and those guys came over to join all of us.

"I'll never forget watching *Dr. Never-There* take off her *Clowns of Hope Tour* button and pin it on the memorial fence surrounding the chapel.

"I never expected all the reporters interviewing us. There was a reporter from England who followed us around with her camera rolling. Then another reporter from NY told us he didn't think we should be there. He questioned if we were doing any good and didn't think laughter was appropriate. We explained why we were there and why laughter was needed, especially at that time. When he turned away, with a smug look on his face, I told him 'I have something for you.' and handed him a card that said *Something*. He chuckled in spite of himself.

Even though the days were long and hot (and we ended up in bed earlier each night), I know we helped many people during that time and it was more than worth it."

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## *Finishing the Day in the Greatest Clown Tradition ~ a Paddy Wagon!*



*Left to Right: Pat "Patty Cake" Pierce, Pauline "Daffy Daffodil" Walker, Shirley "Birdie-Gertie" Gorrell, Linda "Clwn Dode" Sweig*

On the last day after hours of clowning and walking the street cheering up people, the clowns took the ferry across the Hudson River to New Jersey. When they got off the ferry they asked a police officer "How far is the Double Tree Hotel?" "Oh, about a mile that way." The clowns responded with a groan. "We're never going to make that, we've been walking all day in lower Manhattan!"

The officer seeing their situation said "Come with me!" He was driving a Police Cruiser equipped with bars. The clowns got a ride with sirens blaring back to the Double Tree Hotel - waving at everyone "We were clowning around too much! When they got to the hotel the four clowns exited the back of the police car, to the laughter of pedestrians, police and hotel workers and guests. What an entrance!

### *From Shirley "Birdie-Gertie" Gorrell, from Belleair, Florida*

"On Sept. 6, 2002, 15 clowns from all across the U. S. went to New York City on a mission to raise the spirits of the grieving, since 9/11/01. We spent three days visiting Ground Zero, Union Square, five fire stations, two police stations, participated in 2 church services and toured the entire New York University downtown hospital.

"Three ladies that we clowning with on the ferry went to a flower stand, bought roses and gave each one of us a rose, hugged us and thanked us for being there.

"At Ground Zero, that was quite different. It was sad -- we were not as well received. There were some people who did not think we were funny. However, once we talked and explained our purpose, they understood and said, 'Yes, we do need you here.'

"An officer came to me and pointed to another policeman saying, 'He comes here every day, never talks to anyone, and never smiles. He just stares at the site.' So I gathered the clowns and we put a nose on him, did our tricks and he was laughing and said, 'Thanks, I really needed that.'

"At St. John's Methodist Church NYC, *Oochee* arranged our participation in the church service. We greeted the parishioners and brushed them off with feather dusters. On their way out, we pulled a feather out of the duster and placed it in their hand, saying, 'This is a reminder that God will lift you up on eagles' wings and hold you in the palm of his hand.' Making eye contact as we placed the feather in their palm. It was very touching,"

*From Connie Coble Roe Nurse Chickie" from Wexford, Penn.*

"This was my third trip to Ground Zero as 'Nurse Chickie'. Each visit I have been astounded by the receptivity of the firefighters and police officers. On my second trip to Ground Zero, Happy Miller, myself and her RSVP clowns went to the Tribeca Transit Police

Station to find *Uncle Mikey*, a police officer we had met in November after the tragedy. *Uncle Mikey* had been in the World Trade Center when the first plane hit. He had brought out 3 groups of people from the Trade Center before the towers began to fall. When we found him again in February he amazed us by pulling out of his pocket, the same foam clown nose we had given him 3 months earlier! Somehow, having that clown nose in his uniform pocket for 3 months had given him some lightness to help cope with the terrible tragedy in which he was so intimately involved.

"On this most recent trip, one year after the tragedy, I was amazed by how much people just needed to talk, to tell their stories. Being just days before the first anniversary of 9/11, we heard many, many people say they just wished this week was over, reliving the pain all over again was just too difficult. Telling their stories to a group of open-hearted clowns seemed to help.

"One of the most poignant stories for me was told by the hotel chef where we stopped for lunch on Saturday after visiting the fire station across the street from the hotel. The chef came out to the dining room to meet the silly clowns. He said 'I know you are here to cheer us up but I'm afraid I will just depress you, but I need to talk'. He proceeded to tell us how the firefighter across the street had been like family and how many (12 firefighters) had never returned home on 9/11. He talked of riding the train into the city the morning of 9/11 and while on that train, the train passengers helplessly witnessed the terrible scenario unfolding. He talked of seeing people jump out windows to their death while the train passengers screamed in horror. He talked of the anger he feels every day and has not lessened with time.

"He accepted noses and hugs from us and then said he would really love it if we all returned to the hotel at 6PM and he would arrange to transport us unruly clowns to his home where he could prepare dinner for us. Time didn't permit for that to happen, but I do feel we helped lighten his heart just a little by listening to his story."

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Connie continues: "There is magic that happens when a group of clowns come together, a special dynamic. Here we were, many of had never met before, but through Maureen Mould's perseverance we came together as a group of clowns from across the country to share our love and silliness. Caring clowning does not take a special clown talent or skill, just a willingness to open your heart and be receptive to the needs of others.

"I was fortunate to meet two of these clowns two years ago on a trip to China with Patch Adams. Maureen 'Oochee' Mould, who without her, this trip would not have happened, and Wesley Flener. Both are an inspiration to myself and many others. Maureen who has a significant visual loss after a lifetime of diabetes (She calls herself 'Illegally Sighted' instead of 'Legally Blind') inspires me with her love, her perseverance, and her tenacity. She is a clown who is always working hard to give to others, to spread more love and fun, to inspire others to do the same and she does it so wonderfully. Wes amazes me by a love for the world so powerful that despite two open heart surgeries, two artificial heart valves, and a pacemaker, he allows his love to propel him forward to take every opportunity to pump up the world with love and fun. He is a man who never spends a day without his red nose either on his face or around his neck. Both Maureen and Wes are an inspiration and a gift to the world.

*Let us be grateful to people who make us happy— they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.*

-- Marcel Proust



**Clowns of Hope at the NYC Memorial Services**

*Top row from left: Shirley Gorrell, Wes Flener, Paul Beals, Bev Engleman Front row: Maureen Mould, Pat Pierce, Pauline Walker, and Connie Coble-Roe*

**Comments from Vanessa Warner of NYU Downtown Hospital Public Affairs & Marketing**

"This is a message of deep appreciation for all that you and the other *Clowns of Hope* did for NYU Downtown Hospital the week of September 11th, 2002.

"Your visit was the highlight of everyone's day - from doctors and nurses, to the administrative and support staff, to the patients and their loved ones. During such a wrenching week of remembrance, the warmth, compassion and good humor of the clowns was a soothing balm to the spirit. We are grateful for your care, concern and interest in the Hospital and the community it so proudly serves."

