

. . . with a smile through it all

by Elaine Vercellone



Elaine Vercellone as Daisy 'D' Dot and Dr. Daisy on next page

Fifteen years ago, the first of October, my four-year-old son Billy developed Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. They immediately put him in Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York. Our whole world was turned upside down. About two months into our hospital stay I was watching my son sleep off anesthesia when two Big Apple Clowns (Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit® - "CCU") came in. Although they saw my son sleeping, they stayed to talk to me. Quietly but surely they showed respectful concern, but tried to add lightness to this very difficult situation. When they left the room, I was smiling. Not a small smile, but a king size smile and giggle.

Who were these wonderful angels who chose to come into this very difficult situation? Did they know what they had done? For when they left the room that day, my smile was back. I hadn't even realized that I had lost it. But, now it was back. My shoulders were lightened a bit from the heavy weight I had been carrying. My mouth felt better, my whole face felt better. They brought back that part of me that was just what I needed to get through this very difficult time. I began singing to my son again, joking with the nurses, looking for every silver lining that I could find. I was on the receiving end of their love and caring. Yes, it was still tough, but it made it so much easier to deal with, especially when it seems that the whole world is going on without you. Being reminded that it was okay to feel happy and laugh, was what I needed to keep us going and it gave me hope.

Although we were at home when Billy's condition would permit it, there were almost daily trips into the New York City for outpatient chemotherapy. As Halloween approached, the nurses reminded me to dress up my son for his Halloween treatment. They would be having a party all day for the patients. The nurses were wonderful, too. They made sure birthdays and holidays were recognized for all of the children there. This was an important observation for me also. I realized that I was not just learning everything I could about my son's illness, I was leaning about life. I figured I would dress up too, and encourage Billy to also have some fun. But, what could I dress up in that would allow me to drive into the city at 4:30 a.m.,

walk to the hospital through the streets of New York, and stay in until arriving back home around 6:30 p.m.? My oldest son, Bobby suggested a clown. "What? Are you sure you want ME to be a clown?" Both boys said "Yes" and they named me *Rainbow the Clown* for the day!

Now what could I bring to entertain kids? I quickly remembered my marionettes. When I was in elementary school, I loved putting on puppet shows and did so for schools and libraries. I quickly went to Mom's basement to dig them out. She was so surprised to know I was going to do this. The most unusual thing about the puppets -- they were clowns! My Mom loved clowns! I never knew how much until then. This was doubly important, as my Mom, too was fighting a battle with cancer. During our growing up years, Mom had this black suitcase that she called her "magic case." She wasn't always as proficient at the tricks as she wanted to be, but when she didn't get it right, she was the first one to laugh at herself and try it again.

The morning of Halloween came; I was up at 3:00 a.m. getting everything ready for our trip. Billy's costume was a pumpkin (Well, I thought it was cute!). I put on clown makeup for the very first time by looking at the pictures on the makeup containers for ideas. Next the costume and extra large All-Star Converse sneakers. I had gotten off a clearance rack. My older son Bobby was dropped off at a friend's house, who would get him to school with his Ghostbusters costume, and off Billy and I went, leaving at 4:30 a.m. for New York City. We arrived at the parking garage we always used. They chuckled when they saw us get out of the car. I figured that to be a good sign. Billy's legs were very weak back then, so he had to use a stroller. Here we were a pumpkin in a stroller being pushed by a mom pretending to be a clown. People were waving - "Look a Clown!" Waving back I thought, "Wow! They really think I am a clown!"

The real test came when I got in to the hospital and stepped out of the elevator into the early morning kids who had to be here for long chemotherapy treatments, too. Kids came up to me, quietly and warmly. For them my costume meant I would be a caring and maybe funny person to be with. I pulled out my Pelham Marionettes (now collector's items), and put on little skits while we waited. It was all coming back to me.

I took this all as another good sign. I was hooked! I wanted to help others the way the Big Apple Clown helped us. I needed to pay that wonderful deed back by doing it for others. Maybe to another family who had lost their smile, or maybe just to help people anywhere smile. And I learned that I helped myself smile by doing this. What great medicine!

I made my next costumes and some for my sons Billy and Bobby, too. The hat happily covered the fact that Billy kept losing his hair while undergoing chemotherapy.

During this time, my mom passed away. I also became divorced from Billy and Bobby's Dad. This now made me a single parent. I wanted so much to keep my home and stay where my boys were happy, but I needed to increase my income. Clowning? Why not? With the theater and puppet background I had, I put together some shows - singing, dancing, and telling jokes and stories. I was

nervous, but once I started, I would get wrapped up in the fun of it. So, I had some inexpensive clown cards made up and handed them out to everyone I saw. In the supermarket, drugstore, and even the gas station! I was able to add my clown business to weekends, afternoons, whenever I wasn't working my other job teaching vocational school. Well, we kept our house and even better than that, we kept our sense of humor through it all. We learned that laughing, even during the most difficult times in your life is okay.

From the time Billy developed leukemia, our lives have changed drastically many times. The one thing that has stayed constant however, is my clowning. This I have been doing from the fall of 1987 until now. There were times, of course, that to do my clowning was very difficult. And I thought that many times I might quit. But, as the years have gone by, I am constantly made aware that not only am I doing for others, I am doing it for myself and my family. I know first hand how important hospital clowning is.

Then of course, just as life could be somewhat normal for our little family, in 1993 I was introduced to Jeff and his son Ben. (My boss's Mom thought we should be friends.) Jeff's wife and daughter were killed in a car accident that has left his only son, Benjamin, blind! Jeff was determined to move on for his son's sake. Although I lived on Long Island and he in New Jersey, we saw each other every weekend with our children and spoke on the phone everyday. We decided to marry, combining my two sons, Bobby and Billy, his son, Ben. We added to our family with "our own" Michael, who was born in September, 1994.

My clown has grown so much. I am now known as *Daisy D. Dots* TM for shows and *Dr. Daisy Spot 'n' Dot* at the hospital I volunteer at. I continue to learn, through the classes I attend and all the possibilities we have as clowns to learn from life itself. The two younger boys come to see me at conventions and parades and shows. They love the fact that their mom is a clown. I was thrilled



Dr. Spot 'n' Dot Elaine Vercellone and stepson Benjamin

to have all of my sons accompany me to Disney World last year to see me march with the World Clown Association in the Disney Parade. Will they be clowns when they all grow up? Probably not, Magicians at their friends parties maybe. But I know they will always remember to make people smile.

People will always tell you, "I don't know how you did it, I could never do such a difficult thing!" Of course, we know the truth is that no one volunteers for such difficult life altering events. They are there to teach us about life. It is how we choose to live with them that matters.

Recently Ben was operated on in Lisbon, Portugal on a research artificial vision program to place implants of wires on his visual cortex. This would possibly give him a vision of a white outline around everything, helping him to be more mobile. Ten people were chosen out of 500-1000 applicants. This was only for those that have had their vision taken away traumatically. In 9 out of ten people, this vision has worked. Ben was the one that didn't. They are working on other possibilities to recondition this area of the brain, but nothing yet.

By the way my son Billy was treated for three years at Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York City. He since has gone each year for a check up and tests to detect chemotherapy damage long term. He is 19 and driving me crazy, but the doctor and I wouldn't have it any other way. He is preparing for College in the spring. My other son Bobby is now 22 and is into photography.

I hope this article helps all hospital clowns understand that what they do goes far beyond those hospital walls. They are making a difference only a recipient can explain. Who knows how many go on to do for someone else because of what they have received from that one very special hospital visit . . . from a clown.

This is my stepson Benjamin. He is a wonderful, courageous kid and we are very proud of him. This picture of Ben and *Dr. Daisy Spot 'n' Dot* was taken just a few years ago as plastic surgery to remove a cyst that was forming on the scar tissue by his "real eye". So much damage was done during the accident that his left eye was gone, his socket, cheekbones, etc., had to be wired together. This of course caused a great deal of scar tissue. His left eye is "real" but will never be viable because his retina detached immediately and the eye has continued to atrophy. It has also developed great pressure -- a glaucoma condition symptom which seems to mean he will be losing that eye soon, too. He will then get another glass prosthetic.

When Ben had to get this surgery, it was to be done at one of the hospitals that I clown in. I asked him if he wanted his "Mom" to be there (He calls me Mom), or *Dr. Daisy Spot 'n' Dot*? He definitely wanted *Dr. Daisy*. So, when we brought him in that morning, I walked him in to surgery and then clowned while we waited for him to go to recovery. That is where this picture was taken, in the recovery room.

Elaine Vercellone lives in Montvale, New Jersey and is an active member of the Merrimakers Alley. *Dr. Daisy Spot 'N' Dot* clowns at Valley Hospital and nursing homes in New Jersey. She summers with her family in Fairhaven, Massachusetts where she teaches a small community "Clown College" for the local children.

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The Blue Bee lives on and on and on and on

A side bar from Daisy D. Dot: As I sat at the Saturday night show of the Clown Jamboree in Mystic, Conn., a woman next to me asked me about the dog bone on my sock. I thought it was odd until she told me her name was "Bangles and Bones." She was a clown I had met at a cancer camp in Point Sebago, Maine when Billy was sick that entertained all the families. She used a trick about a "Blue Bee". It has been one I have used in her memory crediting her at every show I have done for the past 15 years !! Not only that, I even had the trick in my pocketbook and performed it for her! What a thrill to let her know how she affected someone's life 15 years ago and she is still thought of with such love ! What a coincidence ! It was wonderful. To think we could have sat next to each other all night and never known. Wow!

For the "Blue Bee" trick you need a box with a lid that will stay closed. We used the old metal Sucrete cough drop box. But, an Altoid box is fine, too -- because this helps them think there could really be a bee in it.

Taking the box out of your pocket you say. "Wow, I forgot I had this! I hope it's still okay" My friend "Bangles and Bones" from Maine gave this to me. She is from Maine and Maine is popular for blue things, like blueberries and blue bees. Have you ever seen a blue bee before? Would you like to see it?"

"That's great, I'd love to show it to you. Are you afraid of Blue bees? (If they are, you say, "Okay I'll stand a little over here then, next to him" (someone else) "Is anyone allergic to Bees? If you are I'll stand over here. Now, my friend Bangles and Bones told me I could show it to my friends if they raise their right hand and repeat after me, 'I promise to help Daisy D.Dots put the blue bee back in the box should it fall out.' (I have learned to say this with lightening speed) "Wow you were so fast, I could hardly hear you!" Then draw it out more by saying, "Now are you sure you want to see the Blue Bee? You know I haven't let in any oxygen for quite awhile, so I'm not sure what will happen, so I'll stand a bit away from it also. (Stand as far away from your outstretched hand as you can). "Okay now, on the count of three -- One..Two.. are you SURE you want to see it? Okay, one..two.....three." Open the box and there is a card with a blue letter "B" in magic marker on it.

Then happily tell them That they can do this, too ! Just go home and find a box with a top, draw a blue letter "B" and go into school tomorrow and do this to your friends. Have them raise their hand and do all the silly things we did and have fun, too !

This is a tried and true. I hear from parents all the time how much fun their child had performing it !

Please feel free to use my patter. It's from me to you !

Daisy D. Dot