

Kootenai Medical Center Smile Squad

By Vicki "Mac OddBall" Ball and
Brian "Harley" Babcock

Several times a month a lone cowboy can be seen wandering from room to room at the Kootenai Medical Center. His huge hat and red nose helps in his quest for his lost horse. Strangely enough, each patient or staff member that Uncle Bobo approaches seems to have seen the lost horse and helps in the quest.

Bob Edwards wanted to grow up to be a professional clown. He had been accepted at the Ringling Brothers Clown School but didn't get to go. After spending 25 years as a Fireman, he retired and decided to volunteer as a clown at the local hospital. He is now the President of the Kootenai Medical Center Smile Squad in Coeur d'Alene Idaho.

Former nurse and nursing instructor Bev Toelle started the Smile Squad in 1997. Her mother-in-law died of cancer the year before, but even in the midst of that loss, Bev was impressed by the healthy use of humor among the nurses to help loved ones through crises.

Following that experience, Bev began researching humor programs used in large hospitals nationwide; from periodic clown parades to nurses providing carts with joke books and funny videos. She found that several medical studies have documented how humor stimulates the immune system, increases neuroelectrical activity, and relieves stress to help prevent heart attacks.

With that information in hand, Bev persuaded hospital administrator Joe Morris to try a humor program at KMC. Since then, about 100 clowns have been trained, of these 25 to 30 are active at any given time. Participants pay \$35 for the 18-hour class.

Sparky, aka Sandy Kojac, started by drawing humorous posters and passing them out to children in the Redding California hospital. Later on, she became a Moose Lodge Clown. After moving to Coeur d'Alene, she joined the Smile Squad.

Peacock, aka Ralph Galloway, was drafted into the Smile Squad. His wife had seen an advertisement for the clown class at KMC and signed him up without his knowledge. He clowns in the memory of his son who passed away tragically. His son had been a clown and actor, starring as Beast in a college production of "Beauty and the Beast."

When Ralph was diagnosed with colon cancer, he took his sense of clown with him, as well as some handmade butterflysun-catchers. The butterflies decorate the windows of the North Idaho Cancer Center and those of his fellow survivors.

At least three people came up to Shobi at Clown Camp and said they were inspired to come to camp because of the article about the *Smile Squad* in *American Profile*- a syndicated Sunday Newspaper magazine in Northern USA. The clowns clockwise from top left are: Bob "Uncle Bobo" Edwards, Carol "Minnie" Cardarelli, Betty "Pansie" Mills, Antonia "Tulip" Babcock, Brian "Harley" Babcock, Middle: Collen "Sunflower" Buzolich, Sylvia "Goofy Gran" Wheeler, Julie "Joyful Heart" Hoss, Sandy "Sparky" Kojac, Bottom: Jeanne "GIGI" MacConnell, Mikinzie Hourland, Dawn "Sunrise" Pearson.

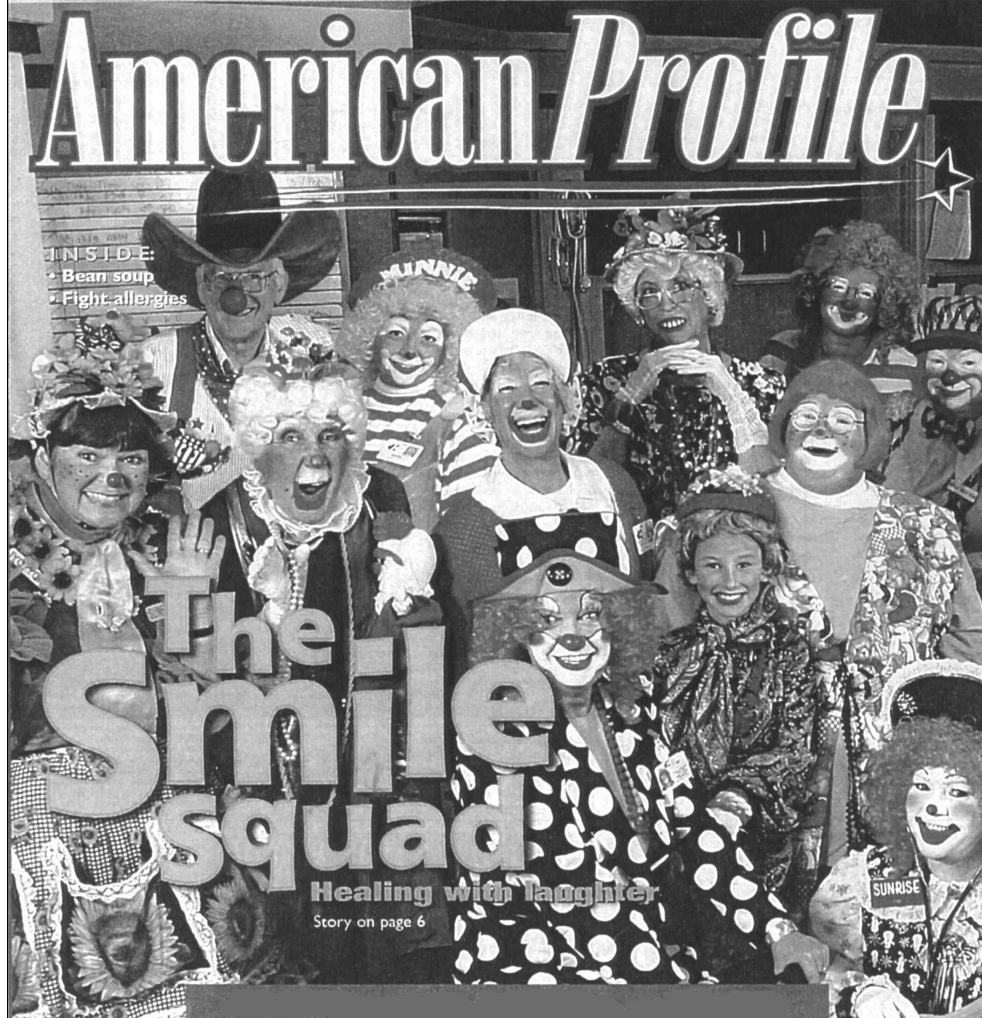


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Other cancer survivors have found a "home" with the Smile Squad. Humor has helped ease the journey through cancer treatments. Following a mastectomy, Vicki "Mac OddBall" Ball promised to keep her friends "a breast" of her progress. Halloween found her getting chemotherapy in clown. Radiation therapy became a trip to the "tanning booth" complete with radiation tech "cabin boys."

When Betty Mills had emergency surgery and required a temporary colostomy, she went to her first post-op exam, arriving with a goldfish (safely sealed) in her colostomy. As "Pansy," Betty presents classes during new employee orientation at the hospital. She and her husband Ron have generously supplied the use of a pickup, a trailer and Ron's shop for the float used in several area parades each year.

The Smile Squad not only serves in the hospital and nursing homes, but also in community outreach programs and parades representing KMC to the public. Brian "Harley" and Antonia "Tulip" Babcock have presented clown classes in the area schools and libraries. The Smile Squad have also trained clown ministry clowns and is set up to train Gonzaga University students in starting their own clowning program in Spokane, Washington.

[For further info, contact The Smile Squad through Brian Babcock at papapoooh@earthlink.net.]