

Caring Clowns of the Okanagan Valley

From Carole Fawcett of Vernon British Columbia Canada

The beautiful Okanagan valley is located between the Canadian Rockies and the mountains of Vancouver



How the Kalamalka Caring Klowns Got Their Start – Carole Fawcett

It seemed to me that my pain was never going to end. I had lost my marriage, my son, my father and gone through 12 operations on my legs by the age of 41. Then I met a wonderful and special man. Everything was lovely for six years and then, in 1998 my beautiful gift from God died.

I went into a 6-month depression. It felt like all the goodness in my life was systematically being removed. After 6 months I became very bored with my depression and I sat bolt upright in bed one night and thought "why can't clowns go into the hospital and bring love to those who may not feel well."

So, I approached a woman in town who had done some clowning. She had heard of a group in Salmon Arm who was starting the very same thing. I couldn't believe it, I thought it was a unique and novel idea. (Little did I know it was done world wide!) So, together, we went to Salmon Arm (a little town 45 minutes away from Vernon) and took their day long workshop. Joan Willey in Salmon Arm had heard of clowns in the hospital in Edmonton, Alberta. She asked them for an outline of their training and proceeded to give it to us on that day in 1999.



The Kalamalka Caring Klowns counter-clockwise from bottom center: Carole "Flower" Fawcett, Doris "Bubbles" Bensmiller, Andy "Andrew McSnort" Mather, Janice "Miz Mouse" Bushey, Cory "Hayseed" Bendall, Shannan "Moppett" Dreger, Julia "Squeek" Stead, Lue "Stitches" MacPherson, Cher "Hortense" Stevens Photo by Brenda Hala Photography

I took the information home and due to my background in crisis counselling, rape crisis, AIDS education and disability issues, I expanded the workshop considerably. So, the Kalamalka Caring Klowns were "born" in May of 1999 and my dream came true. We had eight people attend the training weekend and a couple of those eight people still belong to the clowns. We helped the Kelowna clowns get started by presenting their first workshop for them and giving them our training materials to use. They usually have a workshop in the Spring and we have one in the Fall. So, we take turns with the training and it works quite nicely.

The 25 hour workshops for the clowns include such topics as: The Psychology of Humour; Listening Skills; Definition of Stress and How It Effects the Body; Clown Etiquette in a Hospital; Pantomime; Puppetry; Make-up; and, Costuming. All trained clowns must attend a hospital orientation after their clown workshop. Volunteer caring clowns are special people who come from all walks of life and who have frequently experienced personal challenges in their personal lives and know how it feels to be in a hospital bed, or to have lost a loved one. They give away love and caring, disguised as laughter and hugs.

With their colourful costumes, friendly painted faces and big red noses, Jest for Caring of Salmon Arm, Kalamalka Caring Klowns of Vernon, and Caring Clowns of the Central Okanagan of Kelowna all have the same objective in mind. They are therapeutic clowns who give away large dollops of fun and laughter by telling a corny joke, offering to do a "nose transplant," handing out bookmarks, laughing and giving hugs to everyone they meet. They are compassionate listeners who also leave a trail of giggles behind them.

The Kalamalka Caring Klowns have 27 clowns at present. There are approximately 60 caring clowns in the Okanagan Valley. We are very well known in our community now. We visit in the hospital, in nursing homes and we take part in medical related fund raisers (Cancer, Kidney Foundation, etc.) We are also asked to take part in other events and for this we ask for money. This helps us to buy our stickers and props that we take around with us when we visit. We have a little basket on wheels that a local car dealership painted for us and it is lined with a huge zippered bright cloth bag where we can keep our props. (Bubbles, stickers, etc.) We try to visit in the hospital once a week and we try to get into as many nursing homes as possible.

Starting this group allowed me to heal myself. It helped me focus on the needs of others and by doing this, my own pain diminished. I discovered I had the heart of a clown.

"What is therapeutic about a clown?"

We are familiar with the five senses, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting and seeing. We could easily add a sixth, laughter. Have you ever noticed that people



Shobi had the pleasure of giving a two day workshop in the Okanagan Valley sponsored by the Kalamalka Caring Klowns. Shown above are the participants in commedia character masks (created by Shobi) used for character development in the workshop.

who have a good sense of humour usually bounce back from a stressful situation faster than those who don't? The reason could be that people who can laugh at themselves and life in general are more flexible in their approach to life.

Therapeutic clowning was introduced in Canada in 1986 by Karen Ridd, a Child Life Therapist with the Children's Hospital in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Karen started using a clown character, by the name of Robo, to work with sick children. Robo was a silent clown thereby empowering the children she visited. (They had to do all the talking) The program was such a huge success that the first group therapy clowns in Canada were formed after Karen left the hospital in Winnipeg and Toronto.

In B.C. we have *Doc Willikers* (a.k.a. Paul Hooson) the only paid therapeutic clown in the Province. *Doc* has worked for 8 years at the B.C. Children's Hospital, where he delights his young patients. The staff are very pleased with him and a team of volunteers work hard fundraising to keep him at the facility. *Doc* is viewed as an alternative form of medicine for the sick kids and their families

Today, there are therapeutic clowns across Canada who have formed a national organization - Therapeutic Clowns of Canada.

What Keeps a Group Together?

We do our business very quickly. We only spend about one hour on the serious business - who goes where when, Then we have another one hour of "fun" or "playtime" This is where we learn about juggling, makeup, improv, tips for hospital visits etc. It also helps that we have particularly wonderful people in our group. No one takes themselves too seriously and our meetings are full of one liners whizzing across the table from one another. We have jokes, hugs, belly laughs at each meeting too.

I do believe that for a group to run well, it must be organized. There must be a few folks who are willing to make decision on behalf of the group membership, but the membership must be able to feel they can input their own views/values at any time without being made to feel they are any less in the organization. We vote on everything. The group vote seals the deal.

The Kalamalka Caring Klowns are very special people. It seems that this type of work attracts special people. We are a close knit group who believes with all our heart and soul in what we are doing. It is gratifying to watch people "birth" their clown at training. Then to watch them grow as they reach out to others. It warms my heart.

Jest for Caring in Salmon Arm, contact Joan Willey at (250) 833-3636 local 338 or e mail joan.willey@interiorhealth.ca

Kalamalka Caring Klowns, contact Carole Fawcett at (250) 549-2034 or e mail flower1@shaw.ca

Caring Clowns of the Central Okanagan, contact Diane Mairs at (250) 309-3850 or gdmairs@silk.net.