

The Red Nose Brigade continues in Israel

By Linda "Clown Dode" Sweig

Clowning in the hospitals in Israel has been something I've wanted to do for quite a while, but I've been afraid to go because of the homicide bombings.

I read with interest the article in the Hospital Clown Newsletter about Michael "Ernst Desire" Fandal's clown trip to Israel and contacted him.

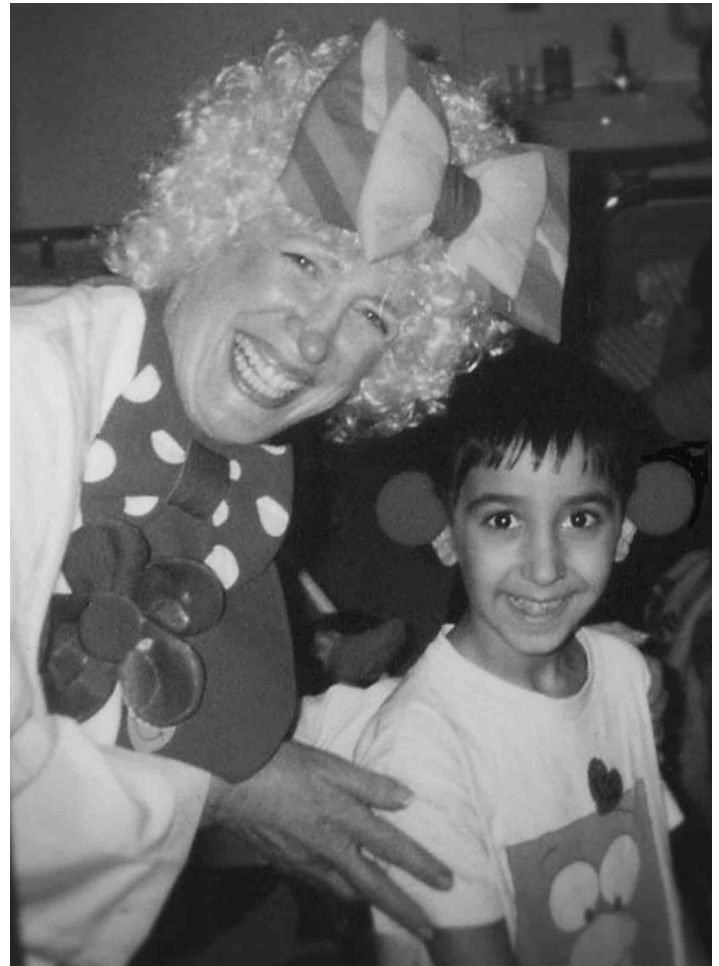
Mike told me about an upcoming trip planned by the New York Shomrim (Hebrew for "Watchdog") Society -- a group of mostly retired (some active) police officers. Mel Parness, honorary Shomrim member and coordinator of the trip, was happy to have a hospital clown join the tour. With a "police escort," experts in matters of security, I felt comfortable going.

Twelve police officers, a few wives, two young sons, and a clown. What a group! We arrived at Ben Gurion Airport on September 3rd and traveled to Jerusalem where we had dinner with and a briefing by the Minister of Tourism.

I did not travel to or throughout Israel in clown costume, as a clown could be a suspected terrorist in disguise. My purpose was to relieve stress, not create stress. Also, wearing clown attire in some of the holy sites and walking amongst praying people would be inappropriate.

Our tour bus stopped on a couple of occasions at a shopping mall and we lunched in the food courts. Not being in clown didn't stop Mike Fandal or me from making friends and clowning around with receptive people, and almost everyone was receptive. (No different than here.) Smiley faced heart stickers were a hit. People were taking them to pass on to others.

At the conclusion of our first evening in Jerusalem with the Minister of Tourism, I was told to be in clown the next day as we would be visiting a nearby city where I would clown for the kindergartners. That morning we boarded the tour bus and our first stop was police headquarters in Jerusalem for a meeting with the head of forensics -Dr Azi Zadok.



Clown Dode "Dr. Clowne" above with a hospitalized young Israeli boy who plays around with "Clown Nose Ears"



We all filed into the conference room and sat at a oblong table. Dr. Zadok arrived and shook hands, took his seat, focused on me, and started to smile. I saluted. He kept grinning. The "guys" said "She works undercover!" It was very funny. At the end of his talk, he was presented with a Shomrim t-shirt and hat. And a clown nose which he put on immediately (See Photo on next page).

Clowning for the kindergartners was delightful. Our language barrier never got in the way. The children loved to sing and sing we did. I sang a line and they repeated my words and gestures. Some children came up "on stage" to assist my blundering and the group kept laughing.

Mime and improvisation were key. The children sent word to me the next day saying "Thank you., we love the clown!" They promised to learn English for my next visit.

The next day, Mel and I did not go touring with the group. We took a cab to Shaare Zedek Medical Center where I spent two wonderful hours clowning with patients, staff, and visitors. Shaare Zedek is the Medical Center that cared for the victims of a recent bus bombing that killed 18 people and injured many children.

Some of the victims were still hospitalized, but I did not ask the staff who was who, as all patients are important to a clown.

***I was so absorbed with the people and playing,
that I didn't think about what part of the world I was in.***

One little boy clowned with me for about 10 minutes. We communicated effectively through mime. He immediately caught on to "getting permission" and gave out stickers and hand shakes wearing my kitten mitten. A terrific clown he was. We hugged goodbye.

Clowning with patients and visitors in that hospital was no different than clowning in a hospital in Chicago except that I mostly mimed rather than spoke, even though some of the patients spoke English. Responses were the same - people were eager to smile and play, and thankful that I came.

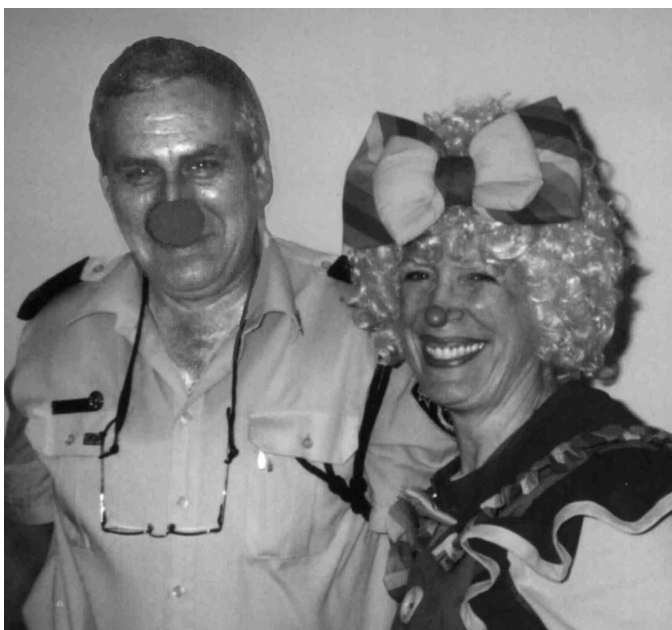
From Shaare Zedek, Mel and I cabbid it to a Hadassah Hospital where my experience was as rich. That morning, I had been skittish at the thought of leaving the group and cabbid it solo to the hospitals, but because Mel, who has been to Israel over 100 times, agreed to accompany me, I felt safe.

We spent 3 days and 4 nights at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Jerusalem and, of course, got to know the staff. One waitress in particular loved to clown around with me. I gave her a clown wig and nose that I'm sure she still has fun wearing. Mike "Ernst Desire" Fandal, executive secretary of the Shomrim Society, never missed an opportunity to make friends and clown around, whether or not he was in clown.

Mike was in clown when we had dinner at the Tel Aviv hotel with a member of the Knesset. Getting a clown nose from him she said "I'll put it on whenever someone disagrees with me."

As our tour was ending, the group went to visit patients at the B'nai Zion Medical Center in Tel Aviv. Ernst Desire and Clown Dode interacted with patients, staff, and visitors who received them with warmth and smiles. The president of the Shomrim Society remarked that he and a few others had been skeptical about the clowns until they saw peoples' faces light up as we entered the room.

People are people: ready to smile, to play, and, particularly in this stressful country, eager to enjoy the moment. Israelis live for the moment. They are thrilled to see friendly foreign faces. And my clown heart was warmed.



*Dr Azi Zadok - Head of forensics, Police Headquarters,
Chech Ja'arach, Jerusalem, Israel*

***The More I Give,
the More I Get Back.***

I was a happy, some- times print model and actress, living on potatoes and working a day job at Marshall Fields, a department store in Chicago, when I married and got to give up my day job. My life was so beautiful and I felt so blessed, I wanted to give back.



Chris Yatko came to Chicago after studying with Jeannie Lindheim's Clown Troupe in Boston. He came to Chicago for acting , but wanted to clown. So, he went to Children's Memorial Hospital Volunteer Department to start a clown program. He took an ad out in an actor's newspaper in 1999. I answered the ad and the rest is history.

Still being a fairly new caring clown, I went to a nearby nursing home and said to the activities director, "I'm a clown. I'll clown for you." She said "What'll you charge?" "Nothing," I answered. Her eyes got big, and she said, "Wow, come any days, at 10:00 am or 2:00 pm." So my weekly visits to the nursing home began in addition to weekly clowning at Children's.

My acting and improvisation background has had a great influence on the way I've developed as a clown. I consider improv the best clown training there is. I've had 5 improv classes and will continue to take more to keep honing my skills. I am strictly improvisational and interactive. The patient becomes my improvisational scene partner.

My mother, Doris who everyone called Dode (pronounced DodEE) gave me the compassion, sense of humor and craziness to be a caring clown. I am Clown Dode in her honor. If only I had found clowning when my mother was still alive. She would have clowned with me and would have been fabulous. My mother had the heart of gold and a clown brain. When my father complained he wasn't getting a square meal, she bought paper plates, cut them square, and served dinner on them. Her first priority in life was taking care of those she loved and reaching out to others. As a child, it was common for me while shopping with my mother, for her to see a beggar on the street, and invite him to sit at a lunch counter with us -- her treat.

The Funnybone Care Team was founded in August '03. We clown regularly in Chicago at hospitals, nursing homes, fund raisers, and charitable events in addition to working with the oncology program at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Bringing people into the caring clown movement is my passion. What we do is so important to society. And, what I've found is that the more I give, the more I get back.

Linda was at a bridge club meeting one day and peaked the interest of friends, "I was telling people about the Mexican Clown trip. Another player, Joe English, motioned me to the corner of the room and asked, 'Can you bring clowns to Jamaica? I said 'Yes.'" He has been on many trips to Jamaica and was intrigued that the clowns wanted to interact with the people "beautiful people of Jamaica." That is how the Jamaica trip on the following pages evolved

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