

"Zippity Doo Dah - Zippity Ay My, Oh My, What a Wonderful Day!"

Or . . . How I Started My "Humor Therapy" Program

By Kathy Keaton - "Piccolo the Clown" of San Angelo, Texas

That's the tune many hear coming from behind closed doors at Angelo Community Medical Center in San Angelo, a small town in far West Texas. Every Tuesday and Friday I wake up enthused and excited knowing today is "Humor Therapy Day." To me, "humor therapy" is the addition of laughter and humor along side traditional medical treatment at just the right time, the right place and with the right people. The trick is that those things are constantly changing from minute to minute. Getting to clown for the care givers and staff and anyone else I meet in the halls, is just a bonus!

Hi! I'm "*Piccolo*" and I've been a clown for 28 years. I started my "Humor Therapy" program about a year and a half ago.

I have always clowned alone because there were few clowns in my town and the ones that were here just came and went. I have always done compassionate clowning intermingled with my children's parties, singing telegrams and school programs. I'd just pop in and volunteer, whenever I had the time. When I committed to an ongoing program at my local hospital it was for regular days, specific times and as an independent contractor. After becoming a widow several years ago, supporting myself became a priority. I still do philanthropic clowning for organizations and events that are close to my heart.

I have no formal clown training. I am a self-taught clown. I used what I now call the "Go ahead and try," method, the "What have you got to lose" method and the "Fake it till you make it" method. I learned early that although many times I didn't know what I was doing, no one actually knew what I was "supposed" to be doing. I taught myself to juggle while watching "The Young and the Restless," perfected the weenie dog and giraffe balloons in every color, from a book I bought and tried my hand at magic and face painting. It was when my uncle, a percussionist in the Tulsa symphony, presented me with a homemade "kazoo-sa-phone, complete with birds, bananas, flowers and a kitchen funnel attached, that I discovered that my musical ability and one on one walk around shtick worked best for me.

After a fifteen -year semi-clown hiatus, while as they say "life happened" I rejoined COAI and "The Texas Clown Association." I also joined AATH (The American Association of Applied Therapeutic Humor). I began to focus and learn everything I could about the positive health benefits of humor and laughter. I bought books on health and humor and began to collect every article I could find about ongoing studies and the growing dynamics of how humor and laughter affect our minds and bodies. I read that studies are showing that humor and laughter reduce stress, increase our T-Cells (those cells that help fight against the flu, colds and infections). I also learned that laughter increases oxygen, helps reduce pain and lowers the blood pressure. It was at an AATH convention in 2001 that I picked up The Hospital Clown by Shobi Schwebke and Patti Wooten.



I read The Hospital Clown: A Closer Look from cover to cover several times and took notes. I gathered information from The Hospital Clown Newsletters and went on line to The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor website. I used all of the information to help develop my proposal.

The proposal was for a six-month "pilot program" as an independent contractor to perform two times weekly for four hours a day. I thought that would give the administration and myself time to evaluate the program to see how it was working for both of us. We could also observe how the patients and staff were reacting. The hospital agreed to a one-month trial program. That was a year and a half ago.

My proposal was brief and concise. It included:

- The definition of Therapeutic Humor (from AATH.org);
- A quote about clowns from Richard Snowberg's book The Caring Clown;
- A short sentence about Norman Cousins and how he discovered the connection between humor and pain;
- The benefits of humor and laughter from ongoing studies from people like Dr. Lee Burk;
- The Plan: Goals and Purpose, possible supplies or extra expenses, what I would do, and how many hours and days;
- A sample evaluation form for patients, care givers and staff to help measure results (evaluations sheet follows);
- A page about myself and my clowning experiences, explaining why I wanted to clown in their hospital, what I had done to prepare and that I was committed.

After I had my proposal ready, I contacted the hospital's marketing director. She set up a scheduled time for me to meet with all key hospital personnel - the hospital pastor, administrator, head of nursing, and volunteer coordinator. I had a written proposal for each person present. I delivered it in my clown attire and went over every page and offered answers for their questions.

I did not discuss compensation until they had discussed my proposal and contacted me at a later date. I met later alone with the marketing director to negotiate days, times and salary. I am an independent contractor. I am responsible for my own taxes. I agreed to attend hospital orientation along with other new hospital employees to familiarize myself with the hospital's rules and regulations. During the year I have been now asked to speak at the orientation to explain my humor program and the health benefits of humor and laughter. I also get to do presentations during the new nurses orientation and for other ongoing educational programs for staff. I appreciate the times I get to educate and enlighten the staff about the benefits of humor and laughter. Many on staff now quickly guide me to patients or staff that are stressed, angry, lonely or in need of an "attitude adjustment," a song, or a little lift in their spirit. Some are always anxious to share a joke, ask me to work with a patient that is a little cranky or needle a staff member that may be acting little too serious. I am always aware of the serious nature within the hospital and alert to times that a clown, humor or laughter may not be appropriate even at the coaxing of staff or care givers sometimes.

I guess there are several parts to my story. One is to say "Thank you" to other clowns who share their craft so freely. Specifically Patti and Shobi who took time to write "The Hospital Clown Book" for those of us non-medical clowns to help guide us into the hospital world. Also thank you to Richard Snowberg and Rainbow who at a COAI convention in the 80's gave a name to my compassionate clowning and planted seeds for my future ideas. They, like most clowns, rarely get feedback on whom they have touched or helped.



Rehab Technician Jessie Cortez helps a patient with motor skills while making a snake as "Piccolo" plays a musical request on her "Kazoosaphone"

Second, is to encourage other clowns to not be afraid to clown alone. Even if you have no mentors or other clowns in your area, if you have the desire and enthusiasm, your creativity will help the clown within you grow and develop. It all starts in your heart.

The third important lesson is don't give up on your ideas or dreams. It just might not be the right time or place in your life for things to happen, not only in your clowning but also in life.

The final suggestion is to read everything you can find! Attend conventions when you can. Join the associations and get publications where others share their ideas and experiences.

Every week I am amazed by the resilience and the power of the human spirit I witness in those that are challenged by accidents or illness. I am also impressed with the care and compassion shown by the staff in every nook and cranny of the hospital. I am thankful for the gifts and talents I have been given and the many opportunities that I get to share those gifts and talents with others. It has always been rewarding to make people laugh through my clown character but to make people laugh who need to laugh . . . That is the greatest reward of all!

The Evaluation Questionnaire was a very simple one page questionnaire leading people mainly to the comments part.

HUMOR THERAPY EVALUATION

Humor therapy in the halls of the hospital is a new concept. In order to help us evaluate the benefits of the program please fill in the form below.

Comments are appreciated!

Did you enjoy the clown's visit?

Was the patient responsive?

Were there guests or care givers in the room?

Did they enjoy the visit?

Did the patients seem different after the visit?

(less stress, calmer, decreased pain, more upbeat)

Did the guest or care giver feel different?

Nurse or professional observations?-

please use back if needed.

I gave the evaluation sheet to patients, care givers and professionals. It worked best for me to do it on the spot and wait while they filled it out. That way their thoughts were fresh and I didn't have to remember where or who I'd left the sheet with or expect anyone else to collect them for me later. The evaluations were a good tangible tool to show the administration personal experience responses so they felt positive about the program and they were also affirming for me.

Some of the comments were

"A definite asset to this hospital"

(Did the patients feel different?) "GOODNESS YES!"

"Delightful! Keep this young lady around"

I had no negative comments and the hospital appreciated my initiative to provide them with information.

Below Speech Therapist Lisa Gandy and Piccolo work together with a stroke patient on tongue twisting exercises.



Later I did an **Evaluation for Professionals.**

Dear Staff:

I am half way through the pilot program of clowning in your hospital. Studies show that humor and laughter are healthy and that they:

Decrease stress, lower blood pressure, helps people cope, can help reduce pain, increases oxygen, increases T-CELLS

I would appreciate any comments or feedback on how you have felt about my visits, how my visits may have affected you or your patients or care givers. I'd like to be able to share your opinions with administration and public relations. any comments made by patients after I have left the room would also be beneficial.

Some comments were:

"Patients have said that just looking at "Piccolo " makes them feel better"

"The clown is a beautiful person who brings sunshine within her"

"She is a great treasure in this hospital"

"If everyone had her attitude what a world we would have"

"She makes us all laugh and feel better"

Comments from the staff were all more positive about me personally than the interaction with patients and most times there are no professionals in the room. I feel I have truly developed a closeness with staff and sometimes that ongoing connection week to week with them is more important than that with patients who just come and go.

I have written several newsletters and tried throughout the year to educate staff to the benefits and what drives the humor. They have asked me to start a humor newsletter so that will be my next step. There are lots of good stories to share, and I'm sure that will encourage them to also share with me and each other.

Each week of the initial pilot program I also turned in a report of stories and comments and what I had observed to the administration and public relations.

Reach *Piccolo* at: Kpiccolo28@juno.com