

Hospital Clown Newsletter

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From left bottom corner clockwise: Bárbara Ramos Dias, Pedro Fabião, Juantxo Berasategui, Andreas Piper, Mark Mekelburg, Beatriz Quintella, Harry Rothermel, Fernando Mota, Anna Banana, Ana Piu, Ramones, Carlos Moreira

Once upon a time there was a clown that, while passing in front of a Hospital, looked through the window and saw inside some children. "Can I come in?" She asked.

That's how **Operação Nariz Vermelho – Operation Red Nose** was born. It was in 1993 and the clown was Beatriz (Bia) Quintella, who started working as a volunteer in several hospitals in the Lisbon area.

In September 2001, thanks to a generous grant from GlaxoSmithKline, this work was paid and expenses covered for the very first time. Two more professional artists joined, Barbara Ramos Dias and Mark Mekelburg and became co-directors.

Today there are twelve clowns – specially trained artists whose objective is to offer hospitalized children some moments of happiness and relief from their pain. The main objective of Operation Red Nose is to expand and provide weekly visits to all hospitals in Portugal. And they are well on their way to doing this.

Today Operação Nariz Vermelho has weekly "appointments" in seven hospitals. Four in Lisbon: Dona Estefânia Hospital, Saint Mary's Hospital, Portuguese Institute of Oncology, St. Francis of Xavier Hospital, and two in Northern Portugal: IPO of Porto and Pediátrico de Coimbra

Their story continues on Page 9

Operação Nariz Vermelho ~ Portugal



The Red Nose is Our Symbol and The Smile is Our Flag

Shobi Dobi was invited to a festival in the Azores by Clowns International (www.clownsinternational.com) and sponsored by the town of Praia da Vitoria, a coast town on the island of Terceira, Azores. This is how I get to cover programs. Once I am in the country, I get to meet the clowns and organizers. So I called the Operation Red Nose and said "I'm coming to Portugal!" I never expected the hospitality I received. Shobi had the pleasure of being "taken care of" for 10 days in Lisbon by the Red Nose Operation before the festival.

While in Portugal, I did three workshops. One was a weekend retreat with the Clown Doctors in Coimbra. What a wonderful diverse group of clowns. They are from various countries: Germany, Spain, Brazil, the USA, and of course Portugal. Below is the group in mask. I travel with 20 - 40 commedia masks which I have made and use them in all my full day clown workshops. Masks make you aware of the magic of fantasy which is so important in hospital clowning.



I also used the masks in a two hour "Find Your Inner Silliness" workshop with 44 nurses from their hospitals and the same for their patrons and volunteers (*Friends of Operation Red Nose*). Shobi was a gift to the "Friends." But my intent and that of the organization was to give the staff, volunteers and patrons a first hand knowledge of what it feels like to be a clown. It was amazing to see how expressive everyone could be behind a mask. Of course, I had some of them take the mask off and put on a red nose and act the same as if they still had on the mask. They were just fantastic. We laughed and of course we "clown cried," and just had a good time opening our hearts and letting out the joy that is so often hiding under our stressful lives. We learned how infectious joy and laughter really are. We didn't just talk about it!



Above are the three main directors of the program. In the middle is Beatriz (Bia) Quintella, the President of the Association who integrates the artistic direction with Mark Mekelburg (Trainer) and Barbara Ramos Dias (Hospital and Human Relations).

"Launching the Operation" from Bia

"In September of 1993 after reading an article about Pat Wooten in *Laugh Makers Magazine*, I decided to develop some clowning work as a volunteer at several hospitals in the greater Lisbon area. The experience was fascinating and as the research grew I discovered other groups all over the world who were developing programs in this area.

"But it took us several years until the dream of building a professional program of clown doctors in Portugal could happen," says Bia "After visiting the Big Apple Clown Care Unit in New York City and the *Doutores da Alegria (Doctors of Happiness)* in Brazil, I finally got the nerve and invited Barbara and Mark to join me in creating a project in Portugal. It had to be done! Our children couldn't wait anymore!

"The program has been going on since September 2001 and when I asked Mark what their titles were, he laughed and said that they don't have titles, they just use the best of their talents to be a very active part in the structure and running of the program."

The original project received sponsoring from Glaxo Smith Kline for four months. Mark, Bia and Barbara clowning one day a week in three different hospitals. Each clown would go to one hospital and then rotate the next week. Mark commented, "We didn't work in pairs then. It was just a matter of getting our feet wet and getting the hospital used to the idea of a clown doctor,".

"We are now 12 clowns working in 7 Hospitals and we have a waiting list of 6 Hospital asking for us!" Bia adds "According to writer Gabriel Garcia Marques - "The first years are always the most steep" But in spite all the difficulties we have been through, Operação Nariz Vermelho is reaching for it's goals with the comforting certainty that each minute that the doctors pass with our children has been, and will be, a precious moment. Our challenge?" Bia adds, "Keep growing until all hospitalized children in Portugal have their own, private, close encounter of the third kind with the sweetest, funniest, craziest doctors they could ever imagine! Our commitment is to always keep in mind that everything we do, every penny we raise, every petty fight we have with our big artistic egos, everything that moves these ever growing machine has one simple motivation – bring joy, laughter and happiness to our children in the hospitals."

"Laugh a lot, conquer the affection of children, search for the best in every person, make the world a better place. That is the true meaning of success."

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Clown Doctors

Besides training in the entertainment fields, the artists attend seminars dealing with hospital procedures, prevention from contamination and the organization of the pediatric services.

The hospital clown, among other aptitudes, knows how to listen, has sensitivity, emotional stability, initiative, professionalism, solidarity and a lot of affection for his little "patients."

This is a kind of cheer that we made up that summarizes the three main elements of our philosophy of hospital clowning: (it actually rhymes when you say it Portuguese)

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| Estar Present | Be present in the moment |
| Ler Ambiente | Read the environment: the situation, other people, your partner, yourself |
| Ser Agente | Be an Agent |

"At first I felt the same horror as a father for his suffering child. Then a deep empathy was born that gave incentive for my clown to act instinctively, to love, comfort, care for and bring back the laughter and happiness - without the fear."

- Patch Adams

Outreach Program to Nursing School

The organization has an agreement with the largest and most prestigious nursing school, **Instituto Calouste Gulbenkian**, to do a workshop once a month to show the nurses what hospital clowns do. "The idea is to have contact with the nurses before they get to the hospital. We do exchanges with them. They come and do a presentation on some aspect of the hospital and we in exchange go there and talk about humor and humanization of the hospital. So in the learning process they are already getting the idea of clowns in the hospitals. We intend to go to the medical school next. That is part of the whole picture that we are trying create

In the gray of our daily life, the entrance of the Doctor Clown is a ray of sun"

Paula Sousa, Nurse at Hospital Estafânia

Solo or Pairs from Mark Mekelburg

There were two basic questions we struggled with in the beginning. One was whether pairs were the best way to go. Then, did it have to be with the same pairs – long term in the same hospital? It was a mixture of trials. But after experimenting different ways and now that we have six more clowns, we will keep the same pairs working in the same hospitals for the next ten weeks. Our choice is made so that we invest in a more profound relation with the hospital staff and develop a deeper sense of complicity between the pairs.

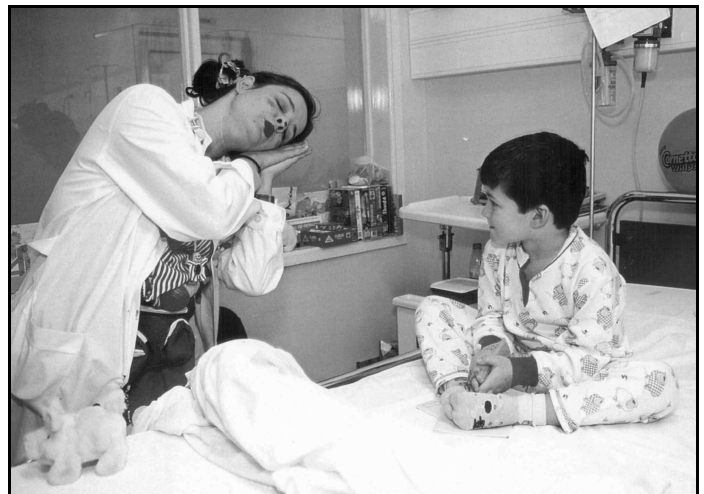
"It may be an interesting aspect of our program. We are doctor clowns only in the hospitals. We don't do our sketches for TV or shows. We tell our sponsors that the clown doctors are special for the hospital. So we want to preserve that special place for the clown doctor characters. We don't take them outside the hospital except for special events related to health/education situations."

Some Stories from the Clowns (Clowns continued on page 13)

** Fictitious names used to protect the children*

Sammy* is a very happy and friendly little boy. Since the treatments at the Cancer Hospital are generally quite extensive, we had already met several times. That day he was isolated and his face just lit up as he saw the clowns. We played and laughed together until it was time for us to leave. That was when he said, "You know, the doctor said that I'm almost, almost well and that soon I will be able to leave the hospital! But I'm going to miss you all very much." Then he turned to his mom, asking "Mom, when I'm completely cured but have just a "little cold", the clowns can come and visit me, right?"

Peter* is 7 years old and was in a wheelchair recuperating from a fire accident which, among other things, had led him to stop using one of his arms for a long time. As time passed, even after they had taken off the bandages, he refused to stretch out that arm completely, afraid it would hurt. As we moved closer to him, we began to play with a magic wand that makes a super-funny sound. He became very interested and immediately began to slowly reach out with that arm in the direction of the toy. At that moment, I moved back slightly and Peter stretched his arm a little forward. At this point his arm was almost completely extended, but he had still an inch to go. We had our eyes locked and he knew I wouldn't make it easy for him... it was then that very quickly he used his other hand to roll the wheelchair forward, victoriously grabbing the toy and exploding with a joyful giggle.



Dra. da Graça (Bia Quintella) in action