

# Elvo Goes To Lebanon



Elvo is actor Aaron Ward from Hawke's Bay New Zealand who works in local television drama, and live theater. Currently Aaron is playing *Aladdin* in a pantomime being staged at Circa Theater in Wellington.

"I started clowning years ago as Cheese-burger the clown at a kid's birthday party when I filled in for a friend who did clowning but got sick. He thought I was silly enough. And from then I started getting bookings, mainly through word of mouth. Elvo is very different – a mimic-clown, going into all the hot spots in the world, and it works really well."

In September of 2006 Elvo went to southern Lebanon to bring smiles to children, and at the same time possibly saving their lives by teaching them about the dangers of UXO (unexploded ordnance) and how to avoid them

This is Aaron's third trip with World Vision. Previously, he has been employed to assist in post-crisis situations in Kosova and Montenegro during 1999 and he spent two months in Aceh, Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami, for which he received The Tsunami Service Medal from Prime Minister Helen Clark. [This was covered in HCN Vol. 10 No. ]

Elvo comments: "Helping children affected by disaster and conflicts find some joy in life is the most satisfying work I have done. My role is not only to help children laugh again, but to help them through their grieving and shock. It was two months after the cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah, but the war is not over for many children.

"Kids have forgotten how to be kids in conflict situations. They need to see the light at the end of the tunnel, they need to be able to gain some normality and they need to laugh again."

Those experiencing Elvo's interaction with the children said "Elvo talks to your heart, not to your brain, and that's why the children like him. Using mime instead of language, he reminds Lebanese children that there are still things in this world they can be happy about."

*World Vision* is dedicated to seeking life in all its fullness for every child, regardless of race, color or creed. In situations like the crisis in the Middle East, World Vision remains *un-apologetically* child-focused, seeking to protect and provide for children in need wherever they are.

World Vision sponsors more than 12,000 children in Lebanon, and more than 14,000 in the West Bank and Gaza. The violence in Lebanon has left thousands homeless and in need of basics to survive. World Vision is printing and distributing 100,000 posters and leaflets along with teacher training kits and children's games and books to educate Lebanese children and their families about the dangers of UXO. World Vision also secured television spots."

On the day of his first performance in Lebanon [Monday September 25], Aaron was more concerned that the children would cry rather than laugh when they saw him. "I have woken up with only one eye today. A *mozzie* bit me on the eye last night and now it won't open. I shall be known in Lebanon as the Cyclops Clown!" he wrote from Beirut.

Aaron was interviewed by Kirstin Engelbracht of New Zealand's Challenge Weekly. Excerpts are below.

"I squeezed in as many shows as I could and made sure that I was fully booked. During the two weeks in Lebanon I did 21 shows. It was exhausting, and four shows a day was the most. Usually I traveled from district to district in World Vision's staff cars. On the way we saw bombed houses, about 70 bombed bridges and people who have been affected everywhere we went. The locals always prepared a safe area for the show and I set it up how I wanted it. If you do something like that you need to be with an organization. It would be mad just to go on your own and often you can even do more harm than good. I performed in churches, schools or outside, to Muslims and Christians and got changed at all sorts of different places."

"With Elvo the Clown I can take stress away from people and make them laugh when they don't have anything else to laugh about. Children are hugely open for it. It is a wonderful thing to see the dramatic change and see them smile.

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..... *even in laughter the heart may ache*



Some people think that to send a clown into a place like Lebanon could be rude or mean, because the people over there lost so much. But there is a misconception that people who are going through traumatic events can't or don't want to laugh." But laugh they did.

The Child Friendly Spaces Elvo the Clown 'worked' in, were designed to support children who are grieving the loss of their families, homes and friends. Here, Aaron also taught children about land mines and personal safety using his clown act. "It's a great opportunity for me to be able to use my clowning and acting ability to teach children life-saving skills I taught them what the different bombs look like and not to pick them up or play with them. The children always took the message on board. They saw Elvo get hurt badly through playing with mines and yelled at me not to touch them when I was getting near the explosives. I also showed them how a mine expert scans the area and marks the field, and the kids learned what not to do."

During the 33 days of intense fighting between Israel and the Hezbollah, more than 18,000 UXOs, (unexploded ordinances) including rockets, mortars, artillery shells and cluster munitions, fell on fields, roads and buildings in southern Lebanon. They were scattered over the countryside, and in the first week after the cease-fire, 17 children were killed by UXOs.

UXOs remain a grave threat to civilians, particularly children as they are naturally curious, and they pick them up to play with. Each bomb has enough explosive capacity to kill or seriously maim multiple people within a 5-to-15 foot radius. Experts claim it will take months for the Lebanese army's bomb squad to dispose of all UXOs. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of youth remain traumatized by the violence they witnessed during the month-long conflict. World Vision is ensuring its Child-Friendly Spaces are UXO-free, enabling children to play and learn in a safe environment.

"Experts have identified about 200 different types and varieties of unexploded weaponry in the country so far. They kill people day by day or tear off their limbs. Cluster bombs are all over the fields and hanging in the trees. That is a major concern, particularly during the harvest season. I met people who lost all their trees and have land that is now unusable. The threat of war is always there, something is happening all the time and people are traumatized."

Elvo has been to some terrible places. He was asked how he copes with the sorrow personally. "You have to shut yourself off to a lot of the stuff you see or hear. If you take too much of it on board you do get quite down about things and it is hard to play the happy, fun guy. But I am no good to anyone if I walk

around crying. You go there for a reason. My job in Lebanon was to make people happy and teach children about the danger of unexploded weapons. It can be tricky and it takes a bit of time to get through that. I normally deal with it when I get back rather when I am over there. Sometimes it hits me all at once when I come home."

"While I was in Lebanon, World Vision had an international prayer day. I did a little show at the end of that day to cheer up the staff who had been working so hard. World Vision prayed a lot for me, and I loved hearing that. It made me feel good and safe."

Helena, a 35-year-old mother of two, from Marjeyoun in South Lebanon commented on how it was a rare sight to see her children smiling after this summer's devastating war in Lebanon. "I don't ever remember seeing my children so happy since the conflict began on July 12, yet there they were, the 7-year-old twins, Elias and Luna, laughing and giggling, in obvious delight."

The mother continues "My children were extremely affected and depressed by the war. Part of our house was damaged and my husband's olive field was destroyed. This field was not only our source of income, but my children's playground during summertime. Now, I will not allow them to go out and play as frequently as before, because of the mines in the ground – added to this the stress of the war, the close proximity of the violence, the loud noises, my children were frustrated and disturbed by all that. I am sure the war left a scar in their heart, but now seeing them laughing like that, I hope the scar will heal soon."

Elvo continues: "There is something magical when children are laughing their heads off. I guess I had little moments all the time, whenever I saw little faces light up. When I handed over a balloon to a boy, he thought he was king of the country. People touched me and tried sucking the joy out of me. When people are enjoying the time – that is exactly what we need. It was also great to see that Elvo pushed boundaries and I even had soldiers hugging me.

"There is a lot that we can all do to make this world a better place. We just need to do whatever it takes to make a good difference to people's lives and to this world we live in."

"I know in my heart that the fun and laughter that I have brought will stay with these people for many years to come and I like to think that, perhaps in some cases, it has been the difference between them being lost in horrible situations and then regaining hope and carrying on."

[www.worldvision.co.nz/CIP/Child.aspx](http://www.worldvision.co.nz/CIP/Child.aspx)