

Hospital Clown Newsletter

A Publication for Clowns In Community and World Service

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Above Charlie's Chaplains 15th Anniversary Commemorative Poster

Clockwise from the bottom around "Charlie Chaplain" Robert Ford (in tux and *The Whistling Woman* Phyllis Heil (wearing red sponge nose): *Magic's Royal Duke* Sammy Cortino, Vince "Zenzel" Ferretti, Dianne "ShDiNah P-Jay" Nail, Quilla "Patches" Mayo, BJ "GlitterSniff" Cortino, Becky "Laffy Taffy" Cortino, Becky "CarroTop Rainbo" Cortino, BJ "Buttons d 'Clown" Cortino, Jerry "Buttons A. Clown" Adams.

Charlie's Chaplains is a part of the Pastoral Care Department at Frye Regional Medical Center ("FRMC") in Hickory, North Carolina.

In 1991, Chaplain Robert Ford read about a clown hospital ministry making visitations on a 3-wheeled humor buggy. Being inspired, he approached Pastor Dana *Bubbles* McKim to discuss the possibility of establishing a similar program at FRMC. McKim joined forces with Pastor Danny *Snickers* Leonard to help forge this new adventure. They devised a training program for 45 students, thus giving birth to Charlie's Chaplains at FRMC. Danny Leonard explained: 'This was a big experiment in creative humor therapy and we had a great time. We didn't have difficulty getting a crowd of people to respond – people who wanted to be a part of something significant and would have a future.'

From the early days, Charlie's Chaplains was a hospital clown ministry. Fifteen years later, there is a new generation of Charlie's Chaplains. The hospital ministry is now a creative ministry, representing several disciplines within the group's talent pool besides clowning. We have a well-known professional teen magician *Magic's Royal Duke Sammy Cortino* in our group who performs simple close-up magic routines. Another seasoned clown Vince *Zenzel* Ferretti juggles, bringing a real air of wonder to our traveling show. Music is an added element to our visits, as one of our professionals is an international award winner – *The Whistling Woman* - Phyllis Heil. Several of our members bring along puppets to interact with the patients and their visiting team members.

Charlie's Chaplains' Creative Ministry Training and Skools

Charlie's Chaplains realizes the need for training and Continuing Clown Education, which provides a means for all active Charlie's Chaplains to nurture and care for the clown within, so we always continue to grow and further develop, in order to perform effectively. This is offered through a full-day very intensive annual Skool, along with on-the-job training paired up with experienced clowns serving as

mentors and team leaders. Charlie's Chaplains do not spend a huge number of hours in a classroom learning technical things to pre-qualify them for visitations. This is intentional. We do receive preparatory training to qualify us to make Rounds, but until a clown gets out on the floor, no amount of classroom time will ever truly prepare them for visitations.



The three founding members: L-R: Dana Bubbles McKim, Robert Charlie Chaplain Ford and Danny Snickers Leonard.

Learning the art of hospital clown ministry, like other forms of clowning, is an ongoing process which is never really completed. As the clown is more experienced, there is always a need for fine-tuning skills.

Each Skool is designed based on the perceived needs of the group at the time of planning. While all-encompassing in nature to include as many areas of clown and entertaining arts as possible in a daylong format taught on multiple levels of experience, the concept of Skool is kept simple. We do not view clowning as rocket science.

Our sessions are open to the public and others in the industry, to encourage more hospital clown groups. While we do not promise what we teach will exactly fit another hospital or health care setting (as it does for us at FRMC), there are some shared components and concepts that could integrate well.

Often interested folks will attend a training session armed only with an interest in the art or a strong desire to serve. Either or both of these motivations are important factors to begin the journey.

Chaplain Robert Ford of the FRMC Pastoral Care Department is "Charlie Chaplain." He is our key contact; it is through him we coordinate the Charlie's Chaplains program. Becky Cortino a.k.a. CarroTop Rainbo, Pastoral Care Department Volunteer since 1997, sets the schedule.

Charlie's Chaplains are also required to receive FRMC orientation and HIPPA Training (as well as drug and TB tests). The training is offered through the Pastoral Care Department.

Clown Rounds

The rule of the day for Rounds is *simple is always best*. If the patient is under heavy medication, he or she will not really be able to fully participate or grasp the concept of a long or intricate presentation. If a patient is able and seems a likely candidate, we perform nose transplants on the spot, with the patient's visitors participating in the procedure. We often perform along with the visitors, drawing everyone into the act.

Sizing up the audience, including the patient's condition and alertness, is the second rule of the day in Rounds. Analyzing the environment in the room also plays an important part in determining our performance – are there visitors? What is the mood in the room? Sometimes, our gentle presence is enough, with a smile and wave, to brighten a patient's day. Sometimes that is all the energy they may have to take in what we can offer.

We entertain the staff at the nurse's station and in the hallways, as our schedule allows. They enjoy their joy-filled interlude and comedic moments with us. Visitors are often treated to entertainment in the patient's rooms, but sometimes we catch them by surprise in the hallways, waiting rooms, elevators and lobby.

We always ask permission to enter a patient's room. If someone is deaf, a nurse might go to them first, to ask. Usually, the patient can see or hear us as we peek in to request permission to visit them. Many of our performances can be done silently. We have also had training in mime, as well as improv, so our team members are always at the ready to perform for the changing venue. In the case of a patient who is blind, we have a lot of audible things we can do, in addition to poems and songs we can perform.

It is also worthy to note that a physical impairment may not be the only challenge a visiting clown troupe might experience. Language barriers may exist which make rehearsed patter of no value. In case the language is not one anyone in the group knows, a silent act or mime works well.

After our Rounds, Charlie's Chaplains teams meet up for a meal and discussion time in the hospital cafeteria. This is a time of sharing and processing what our group experienced during the visitation.

We renew and refresh ourselves with the ongoing training, FRMC Pastoral Care Department Retreat or programs, special events Charlie's Chaplains offers, fellowship time after Rounds with a meal and discussion time help us to process our visit.



Nose Transplant Clinic: CarroTop Rainbo, Hickory's Mayor Rudy Wright, ShDiNah P-Jay, Buttons d'Clown, Magic's Royal Duke Sammy Cortino

The Nose Transplant

The Nose Transplant procedure is simple: the patient picks their nose and we apply it. Following this operation, a "Pledge of Humor" is administered, to make the nose stick. The Pledge often varies with the condition of the patient or other person receiving the Nose Transplant, as determined by the individual clown who is administering this tricky procedure. It may be a long, very dramatic version, or an abbreviated pledge. The Nose Transplant recipient un-solemnly promises to share good-hearted laughter and cheer wherever they may go – equally and freely with all, each and every day.

A rousing chorus of 'You're a clown now, after all! You're a clown now, after all!' follows each and every Nose Transplant procedure and is sure to get smiles and laughter!

Nose Transplants have been well received in more ways than one, as we have observed our Clinic patients literally skipping off with happier hearts than when they first arrived, and previously depressed patients who were willing to play along with us suddenly brighten up with renewed joy. This simple little procedure means more to folks than one might think. A gentleman approached us during a recent visit to share that he still has his nose along with uplifting memories from the procedure he underwent as a patient several months ago.

Clown Week Red Nose Transplant Clinic

Beginning in 2005, Charlie's Chaplains received an official proclamation for *International Clown Week* from Hickory's Mayor Rudy Wright. Needless to say, this drew a lot of far-reaching attention and media coverage. As part of the opening ceremony commemorating Charlie's Chaplains' 15th anniversary at Skool '06 he presented the 3 founders official Keys to the City of Hickory. In return, he was awarded a giant key autographed by all 3 of the originating pastors.

The Nose Transplant Clinic is set up in the lobby of FRMC and is manned by specially trained Humor Therapists, also known as Charlie's Chaplains. All of the *state-of-the-clown-art* equipment and silly props our group can dig up are featured: from plungers to

giant nose droppers (turkey basters); feather dusters to real medical equipment FRMC provides.

Public response to this new event was astounding! The Clinic's first year resulted in 260 successful nose transplants during the seven-day celebration. In 2006, we decided to offer "Free Face Lifts" to their menu of services and challenge ourselves to beating our record set in the previous year but in just two days. The challenge was eagerly met, by performing 287 successful Nose Transplants and 500 free Face Lifts in 2006.

During Charlie's Chaplains' first Nose Transplant Clinic in 2005 we had one of the most heart-wrenching moments we experienced during our clinic . . . we remember one especially touching moment. A sweet lady paused at our clinic table in the FRMC lobby. We explained we were performing a very important procedure this week, as part of our International Clown Week celebration. She thought about it briefly and decided she would like to undergo this operation.

Upon successfully receiving her Nose Transplant, she shared with us that she needed this so much and how glad she was that she took the time to undergo the procedure. She shared that she was going to visit her husband who was dying of cancer, their only son had died years ago from cancer at a young age, and she had cancer. Although her faith was challenged, she told us she believed in God but didn't understand why things like this happen. We all stood huddled together in the lobby, in a huge clown hug for a long time before she left us to see her husband.

This fun procedure is also performed en masse at the monthly FRMC South Campus children's psychiatric unit visits, as Charlie's Chaplains puts on a party including a show performance by one of our entertainers. The children are ages 12-17, and sometimes opt out of receiving a nose. Charlie's Chaplains views this as empowering them to make decisions. Face painting is often offered as an activity during the party. The children may choose to participate in any of these activities or not. Our visiting performers always leave the door open for them to change their minds, if they decide to participate before the party ends.

Regarding face painting at South Campus, Chaplain Robert Ford shared that during these sessions, ". . . the staff was amazed as these kids would open up about significant stuff in their life they hadn't opened up to before or prior to that time with anyone. We discovered that this was truly a medium, a channel by which we could really touch the inner soul of individuals."



Charlie's Chariots

We soon found these carts made quite an impression on all who spotted them on the roll, as they drove miles for smiles all around Frye Regional Medical Center. Everyone seemed to know we were up to something and they wondered what that might be. Charlie's Chaplains had arrived!

Over the years, we have had many experiences that have left indelible prints on our collective clown hearts:

...the seventy-something gentleman who surprised us when he whipped out his harmonica and played a tune for us, after we sang "Happy Birthday" to him.

...a patient who had been so close to death that his children were called in from out of town. We found him in a wheelchair in a hallway surrounded by his family. Upon seeing his weakened condition, we gave him a smile-on-a-stick which he lifted with all of his might to his face, elating and amazing all. Later reports were that he hadn't smiled for days.

...a distinguished aging gentleman who was so touched by our visit with him, that he shared his operatic love with us by serenading us – beautifully from his bed with tears in his eyes.

...a tiny very sick baby in his daddy's arms so enjoyed us, he reached out for us to stay a while longer with him. How could we leave?

...we had the privilege of visiting an original "Charlie's Chaplain" member, in the last weeks of her life. She happily remembered her times with this merry band. As we prepared to go, she left us with a challenge and a mission: "Keep them smiling." The torch was passed on, indeed.

[http://charlieschaplains.bravehost.com/Charlie's Chaplains' BLOG:](http://charlieschaplains.bravehost.com/Charlie's Chaplains' BLOG)

<http://charlieschaplains.blogspot.com/>

Charlie's Chariots (pictured above) drive miles for smiles and do laps for laughs at FRMC during regularly-scheduled Rounds. L-R: ShDiNah P-Jay, The Whistling Woman Phyllis Heil, Buttons d' Clown, CarroTop Rainbo and Patches

In October, 2005, Charlie's Chaplains at last realized our long-time dream of employing hospital clown carts, dubbed "Charlie's Chariots." With the encouragement and mentoring of Bruce "Charlie" Johnson and his wife, Carole "Pookie" Johnson, our group designed two colorful carts to fill with all kinds of goodies and small props to entertain on monthly Rounds. Each drawer is filled with fun stuff – stickers, hand puppets, clown noses, small handout items, and sight gag props.

Several of the members got involved in the design process. Jerry "Buttons A. Clown" Adams asked housekeeping for an extendable duster to add to the cart for a much sought-after "antenna" effect. Actually, he was drawn to the fuzzy thing because of the familial likeness it shared with his own hair, but it was a brilliant clown idea nonetheless. Two dusters were added to Charlie's Chariots, for great effect. Quilla "Patches" Mayo was instrumental in designing colorful, eye-catching flags emblazoned with Charlie's Chaplains' logo, giving the carts an 'official' look.