New Orleans Clown Outreach Tour

by Mildred E.Lykens

On April 28, 2007 a troupe of volunteer clowns, a sound person and a photo/journalist set out from Yakima Washington for New Orleans Louisiana, armed with skits, props, and painted faces to offer some fun and gaiety to the children of this needful city.

In the week that followed eight schools, (one building housed two schools, which required two separate performances) two hospitals and a community center were visited. The schools were treated with a 45-minute program that brought unrestrained laughter and exuberance from both the students and staff as well. At the end of each performance the head clown "Oochee" called for the principal to come forward and receive gifts of that show's music CD and bookmarks for each student, and then she adorned his or her face with a big red nose. As the laughter and cheers from the students died down they learned that they too would receive a "clown nose" of their own, which was met with extra cheers and anticipation.

The hospitals were visited on a quieter note, with designated staff members guiding the troupe, divided into separate groups, to the patients and parents receptive to the clowns in their full make up and costumes.

Each clown had their personal bag of tricks and illusions, that brought a sparkle to the eye, a cock of the head with a "how'd they do that" expression; and smiles to many patients and family members in need of a moment's relief from their dire problems.

The clowns posed with the children as Polaroid photos were taken and presented back to them as a memento of the visit, usually with the patient's new red nose in place.

Nurses and doctors were also appreciative of the lighthearted atmosphere that brought a break in their otherwise laborious routines and favored the clowns with many smiles and thank you's.

The Community Center visit was held outdoors with many seeking the shelter of shade from the over 80 degree heat. The enthusiasm was high as students attentively watched each clown perform their individual acts of expertise, then singled out and surrounded their favorite, while vying for individual attention. The clowns did not leave until each of the students had also received a Polaroid photo and a coveted big red nose.

Clowns above are: in front, "Frank J.R. Kludder" Ward; back row: Maureen "Oochee" Mould, Tammy "Tambow" Danfor; Linda "Sassy" Hauff; Sheila "Ruf-l's" Weber, Photo by Mildred Lykens

A documentary filmmaker from New York joined the troupe entourage for two days, recording the performances as well as personal clown stories, all intertwined with the city's reconstruction.

Through airports, restaurants, city streets as well as the schools and hospitals the clowns were met with waves, smiles and shouts of welcome, and left with local schools begging for their return.

Four women and one man made up the troupe, all between the ages of 48 and 60. They each brought a strong desire to instill joy and love to others through laughter and silliness and thus bring some relief to the sadness and grief so many have suffered in the New Orleans area.

Maureen Mould, as "Oochee" worked diligently to acquire the trip funding through friends, family and local Yakima doctors who believe that laughter is the best medicine. Also volunteering their time were Yakima area residents Tammy Danforth as "Tambow"; Linda Hauff as "Sassy"; Frank Ward as "J.R. Kludder" Sheila Weber, as "Ruf-l's" (and sound person), and from Lyle, Washington, Mildred Lykens, as photo/journalist.

These brave souls endured heat and humidity, less than satisfactory motel accommodations, for one a body search at the airport, for two a school stage collapsing, inaccurate maps, unfamiliar sound equipment, torrential rains bringing impassable streets, as well as a turbulent flight home. But when asked, each felt in the end that it was all well worth the effort and were ready and willing to meet the next challenge.