

# The TideWell Hospice Clowns . . . . .



**LoLo & Crackers** Muriel and Paul Norton,  
of Port Charlotte, FL

From LoLo and Crackers:

Being a TideWell Hospice and Palliative Care Clown and clowning for hospice patients is something that is different and not so different from regular hospital clowning. We are all caring clowns on a mission. However, we do have a major difference in that we know that "all" our patients are faced with life limiting issues.

Just be aware it is not important to the clown to know the illness it is more important that they realize somebody is hurting in a way that we until it becomes our time cannot fully understand, and we want to help alleviate some of that hurt by making a change in their daily routine. I should mention that our current dealings have been with adult patients and not with young children.

Our charge is to go in there, using the standard hospital protocol for the clowns and to lift them, if only for a moment to some place where they can be removed from the hurt they are going through.

The best tools for clowns are not contained in the store or homemade props, but what comes from within the clown. Truly love and reaching out to each patient.

Listening is so important when we deal with the dying. Sometimes our ego makes us want to talk. Listen, because they need that sounding block. Remember you being a clown generally puts the patient at ease and they will want to lighten their burden to you.

Use your props, but more importantly use your smiles and patter to bring them to that level where they can feel less hurt. Be gentle; be soft on your initial approach to the patient their family and friends. Everything around that patient is what they now hold on to and cherish, which also includes the medical staff, aides and even you.

Often you will enter a nursing home room or home where you may encounter the patient's marriage partner, friend, younger children, young adults or all of the aforementioned. It is important to note that you are there for the patient so try to keep them in the forefront while you are there.

Don't talk around them, draw them into the presentation. Do entertain the other members of their family on that visit. Because hospice patients worry about their family and want to see them happy and less stressed, the hospice clown encompasses the whole family. They are in essence patients who are the total part of the loved one who is facing those life limiting issues. When you make the family members happy you relieve some of the stress on your patient.

Watch your patient, note if they are tiring or becoming uncomfortable. Learn to read your patients and if in doubt, don't be shy, ask if they are tired or feeling pain. End your visit by promising to come back again with their permission and report any discomfort the patient is having to the medical staff. You are their advocate and should speak for them whenever the occasion arises.

Hospice clowns rarely go into hospitals because our patients no longer require the hospital curative care and now depend on palliative care in which Hospice is so much the expert.

Hospice gives the patient comfort and quality of life now that they have exhausted their curative medical options.

Hospice clowns form a bond with most of their patients because they generally visit them from the time they start their final journey until they enter into the life that is awaiting them through death. This could be a day, a week, a month, a year or even more. So once again it's so important to use whatever tools are available to you and present them to your patients.

As an example I find that balloon sculptures are one of the greatest tools with our patients; yes they are acceptable in the hospice environment. Patients and family can watch you create something special for them, which they can keep. Next visit you create another sculpture and again they have something when you leave. I have had numerous patients give me the deflated balloon sculpture on my next visit and ask me to fix it.

If you are thinking of doing Hospice Clowning I would recommend that you go through a Hospice Volunteer training program which encompasses the subject of death and dying. One must learn something about what you will be facing and definitely get some insight. Also if you feel this is something you would like to do – volunteer to do respite and vigil work with the dying. This gets you much closer to the patients needs.

One story I'd like to share: My wife Lolo and I received a call to do a birthday party for a young man who was approaching his 34th birthday. He was terminally ill with a brain tumor and was subject to flying off the handle. He was staying at one of our Hospice Houses because he had become unmanageable at home with his wife and family. The party was for him and in attendance were his wife, daughter, son, friends and other family members. One must remember hospice clowning encompasses the whole family. The children and family memories of their father should not all be those moments when he was not the loving father he had been.

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We approached the party with the attitude of trying to draw the whole family together for a happy memory and alleviate some of the stress. We did balloon hats, magic and silly clowning around, always keeping the patient and his family involved in the events.

The family enjoyed themselves including the patient and all went well. The patient seeing his daughter and son enjoying themselves seemed to make a big difference in his attitude. The patient asked if the clowns could come back to visit again which we gladly promised to do.

Aside from the future visits we made, the staff at the Hospice House thanked us for the time we had made for their patient and told us they had found he was less agitated. They did share with us that when he started to get agitated they told him if he didn't calm down the clowns would not visit. The patient finally went back home because he became much more manageable and there he remained with his family until his passing. Lo-Lo and Crackers did encounter the daughter at a memorial service for Hospice patients and she approached us and said she remembered us and thanked us for the birthday party we did for her dad.

What promise of wealth can surpass the knowledge that you did something from your heart for someone else.

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**Sparky** a.k.a. **Betty Palsgrove**  
of Palmetto, Florida



When I was going to retire from the Federal Government, I knew I wanted to do something fun – no more desk jobs! I read about clowns visiting in hospitals and thought that was pretty cool, somebody that would see a patient and not stick them or do something uncomfortable to them. So, I heard about Clown Camp in Wisconsin and went – twice!! I met someone there that lived 2 miles from me in Maryland, so we got together and started clowning in a hospital there.

After a little over a year, I moved to Florida and that's when I heard about the Hospice Clown Alley based in Sarasota. At first I didn't think I would like clowning in nursing homes, but I have come to realize that the people in the nursing homes really appreciate the visits. One big difference between hospitals and nursing homes is that the patients in the hospitals are usually short term, but the residents of the nursing homes are there for a much longer time.

The routine I like to use to start interaction with a patient or staff member is to ask them if they would like a sticker. Most of the time they are tickled to see a clown and start smiling right away and are happy to have someone visiting. The clown outfit is also a great way to start a conversation, since they're so noticeable.

I find that I use bubbles a lot. They are great with young children and elderly people also enjoy them. I ask them if they have had their "bubble bath" yet today, and the response is usually no, so I then give them their "special" bubble bath from a clown! Then, I use a duster to dry them off. Also, when they bat at the bubbles, it gives their arms some exercise! I also use what I call a "cat scan". It's a stethoscope with a plunger on the end, and I have a cat attached to it, so I ask to check the patients' funny bone with it. I usually get a chuckle when I check their elbow, and that means their funny bone is "OK!" The doctors don't know how to do this, so that's why the clown comes to visit.

Once again, bubbles work well with kids, especially if they are uncertain about what this clown is all about. I also have a pop-up frog, that goes up and down, and this works real well with very young toddlers.

One interesting situation we come upon occasionally is when a patient is not fully dressed or not "covered up" and they've already seen you as you knock on the door to enter the room. I just focus on their eyes and speak to them and treat them with dignity and respect. So, if I'm not embarrassed, they won't feel uncomfortable. Then I leave ASAP.



My favorite sight gag is my "sleeping pills." [See photo on next page] It is a very large 7-day pill container, and each compartment has a pill, on a bed with a blanket over it. It might take a few seconds to get it, but when they realize the pills are sleeping, it gets lots of laughter!

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One of my favorite stories is when Snow Bird and I were visiting a patient in a nursing home who had just moved there from an assisted living facility, and she was not happy about it! Snow Bird and I started doing our thing by greeting her like we always do. She didn't say much at first, but after a few minutes, she started commenting on our outfits and how colorful they are. We had a very fun visit with this patient, and after a few minutes said our good byes and left the room. Well, the staff person that was in the room at the time, came running out after us and thanked us for being there, and that this was the first time the patient had spoken in the 2 weeks she had been there! With the clowns visiting her, she had forgotten about her upset from the move! One thing I learned at Clown Camp is that you never know when you will make a difference, but this was certainly one time that we knew!

I have been clowning for 5 ½ years now and have always felt that working with a partner is the best way to keep from burning out. Knowing that I have a commitment with someone else and a time to meet has me ready to go on time, and not decide not to go at the last minute. I have also found that in addition to being FUN, clowning in the nursing homes is very rewarding. The people, patients, their families and all the staff are always so thankful for our visits. Occasionally, someone will ask, "how much do you want for that (sticker)?" And we say, "Nothing, we get paid in smiles!"

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**Popcorn** a.k.a. *Casey Reinhardt*  
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My father was worried when I became a clown. He knows it is easy to hide behind a mask and become someone else. He knows I am susceptible to extreme mood swings and has seen me through a breakdown where I simply couldn't function normally. It was a scary time for me.

Dissociative identity disorder, manic-depressive, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or simply chemical imbalance can disrupt a personality and even cause whole family discord. I like to think of those times as transitional, meaning I was becoming who I am today – a rational, clear-thinking, active and happy person, with

God's help, in control of my life, and assisting others in their transitional journey to wherever their destiny leads them.

When I meet a person, I assess their current situation and try to anticipate their immediate needs. If I can accommodate, I'll follow through with permission. Occasionally I'm met with rejection on sight, as there are a few who are terrified of clowns due to the media's portrayal of some very nasty, evil attitudes behind the masks. This is unfortunate, because the stigma lingers, even when not in face.

Choosing to attend clown training and putting myself into situations where I could be someone else, let me feel free to experience other avenues of life unavailable to me before. I was afraid to leave my comfort zone. Makeup and silly costumes give me a chance to travel roads where eyes view me as trustworthy, caring and devoted in my determination to make a difference in someone's life.

I met a man a few years ago who had a bad reputation for cursing at nurses, spitting food, and lashing out at whomever came close enough. End stage dementia was his diagnosis. I went ahead apprehensively, but asked for God's guidance in how to approach and reach him.

He ate well, they said, but watch out for his raspberries! I fed him a few bites before he let it fly back at me, and I learned quickly to anticipate and dodge the bullet.

Cleaning up the mess, I spoke gently and clearly that I was there to help and not to abuse. I hummed as I worked, and caught him paying attention. The words to "Amazing Grace" came naturally. His ears perked up and his eyes followed me. When he reached out to grab my arm, I did not show fear. I put my hand over his and didn't back away. Eye contact told me I'd found a way to communicate, through song. He couldn't talk to me, yet he could sing. I found out later that singing and speech are in different parts of the brain. "Take me out to the ballgame" erupted from deep inside him, as if lying dormant for years.

I sang with him, and we traveled down paths of old memories, songs, hymns and even a bit of Johnny Cash and Sinatra. I watched for responses and kept track of the songs he knew. He sent messages that he'd been in WWII in the Navy, a proud soldier. He thumped his chest to imply he had many medals. I saluted him and he grinned toothlessly. Communication can be non-verbal, but it means a lot to someone who is locked away inside himself. This man never blew his food at me or cursed at me again. I'd come in singing "Take me out to the ballgame" and he'd join in, with wide arm gestures and excited eyes. I'll never forget him, though he went to sing in the Lord's choir about three months later.

There are many like him. Often a caregiver is not willing to make the effort to communicate with patients in such a state. That is sad. Each person has a story to tell, and some need to reach out to others so desperately that they act out in order to get attention, as negative as that may be.

Being a clown offers an opportunity to behave like a child if we choose. In the same way adults talk to teddy bears and inanimate objects, a clown offers no judgment, no rejection, no biases or prejudices to deal with. It's we who are different, not the patient. Comfort and cheer is the attitude we bring, and hope to leave each person with a little of each.

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I have learned a great deal in my five years as a clown, not just about patients' lives, but about myself as well. My father has nothing to worry about in regards to my work as a clown. I've grown to accept my shortcomings and be proud of my accomplishments. God has blessed me with a rich, full life and I'm more than willing to share it with those in need of my help. I thank Him for leading me in this direction. Putting others' needs first on my priority list helps keep me from the depths of depression, too. When I slather my face with clown white, I'm enhancing my own smile, not covering it up. May God bless all of us clowns with the peace and recognition of a job well-done.



**Snow Bird** a.k.a. *Madylin Iseman*  
of Anna Maria, FL



A favorite way we involve the staff is by passing out stickers, like "I hugged a clown today." This way you get/give and it feels good for both. It also helps you find out who is cautious with clowns and you don't push the clown thing on them.

One time *Sparky* and I went into a room where the client was near end of life. A family member was with the patient and *Sparky* gave her a hug card. As we were going down the hall this lady came running up to us and said she needed her hug. Of course she got more than one – we had made a difference.

Most recently I have found the disappearing coin box my favorite because some time it works and sometimes it doesn't work, but people, and especially children, will help you figure it out.

While making balloons, if I need an extra hand to hold a balloon, I will have the client help. This involves them a little. If the balloon breaks when I'm almost finished, I start again and sometimes again. It actually gives me more time to talk with the client and/or the client's family. If the client is sleeping or unresponsive I enter very quietly and leave a balloon animal or a hug card. At least the family is aware there was a visit from the clowns.

*Snowbird dusts off one of the Clown Sculpture - "Toby"*



I had been a nurse for almost 40 years when I retired (which is not true because you are a nurse the rest of your life). Even when working as a nurse on the floors it was a much better day to see a client laugh or even just smile.

I have had hospice in my background for 25 years, so when I joined the pet therapy group at this hospice, I found out I could be a clown too. Both keep the client at the level of : "Hey I am not dead yet and I want to be treated like I am still alive." That is what is important to me that you keep the client as worthy as a human being until she/he passes over..

I do pet therapy, massage therapy and clown and when I lose a client I can deny it, bargain about it, get down, and some times I am angry, but then I realize this human being allowed me to share a very special time with them. I really am a lucky person to have that privilege to be part of the *crossing over*.

Having nursed a few years in pediatrics I have found that children are very honest with you and will say they saw a bright light and many other things and you have to believe them. Always answer their questions and if it is too hard, talk with the parents. It helps them too.

I have found with this hospice that they work with all the staff by having retreats yearly, a memorial service every three months where the clients who have passed are remembered in a nondenominational service. And there is a family atmosphere among the staff. I also look at how much I have learned from each of the individuals I have met.

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# The TideWell Hospice Clowns . . . . .

**Neanor** a.k.a. **Darlana Zwit**  
of Venice, FL



I got into Clowning by being able to make clown costumes since I am a seamstress. After going to a clown meeting, I got "hooked". After graduation, we did routine hospital visits – usually birthday parties. I got interested in Hospice Clowning and took the hospice volunteer training. Then we formed our hospice Alley.

As soon as I put on my make-up and clown costume, I feel a real change in my personality – "I am a Clown." I am an artist and I dearly love to do face painting. I relate to my subjects and let them tell me what they want painted on their face, arms or legs. It is most interesting hearing their stories and how pleased they are when I finish painting.

A 10- year old girl came up with an adult and started asking about the colors of my costume, wig, etc. I explained the best I could, until she walked over and touched my wig and asked about my nose and make-up. Little did I realize she was blind. I also made a giraffe balloon sculpture. She thanked me and I did a small flower painting on her arm. I felt so honored to be able to relate to her and felt she was happy and said, "Thank you, Lady Clown."

My favorite prop or props are puppets. Walking in to see patients I may have small puppets in my clown suit pockets or carry my favorite puppet (animal or little girl puppet) and relate to the patient – depending on the patients' condition. I also that sometimes the patients want to participate a puppet act. This involves the patient's or children in make believe.

In our clown hospice training we are told exactly how to approach a room in a hospital. First you knock on the door and ask permission to enter – sometimes you carefully peek around the curtain and introduce yourself and smile – possibly greet the patient with a slight gentle touch – talk friendly to them – possibly have a little gift or possibly a balloon animal. Ask if they have a favorite pet – try to make an animal balloon – example a dog. For my blind patients, I feel a gentle touch of hand to greet them helps to communicate.

I am most sad when a patient dies. So hospice has procedure to follow and paper work to complete. I have a family (3 children) and have been involved with children in scouting and religious education. So I've learned to be a gentle person and can console a suffering child.

At present I am healing from a spinal fracture and have had to curtail a lot of hospital visits. I can do face painting if I can sit down for 3-4 hours. I am not "burned out yet". I still like to do clowning and of course I do still sew costumes and make my puppets – also prepare skits for them.

The most important advice I can give to other hospital clowns: Don't be afraid to give it a try when you visit those hospital patients, or nursing homes; just remember how wonderful it is to bring a little joy and love to people who don't even have visitors of family or friends.  
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**Toque & Ding a Ling** a.k.a. **Thomas & Mary Cox**  
of Punta Gorda, FL



One day while we were visiting hospice patients in a nursing home, we were stopped in the hall and asked, "Would you visit my brother?" Since this is a common request, we replied, "Of course." We knocked on the door and asked if a clown could come in. The look on the man's face was one of complete surprise. He actually laughed out loud. The other visitors in the room also appeared pleased. After a few clown antics, the patient became very serious and said "You know, for a moment you made me forget where I was." What a reward for a clown!

Our favorite puppet is "Rocky, " a look-for real furry animal that purports to be a raccoon. With the proper manipulation, he appears to be alive and is our ICE BREAKER. Nursing home patients are pleased to see animals, even our make-believe "Rocky". Many patients want to touch him, but for sanitation reasons we keep him out of reach. We often leave with the promise to bring him back to see them.

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