

A dose of silliness good for what ails you

By Chris Zdeb, edmontonjournal.com August 8, 2010



Dizzy (Bob Disler) entertains residents at McConnell Place West in Edmonton, Alberta, on July 14, 2010.

Photograph by: John Lucas, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON — Bob Disler can make senior citizens feel young again. He does it with magic and the power of suggestion, but only when he's Dizzy the clown.

"I tell them they're all big kids and to imagine they're eight years old again," Disler says. "I do the show according to that and I get a good response."

Disler is the president of the [Edmonton Caring Clowns](#), who use humour and gentle play to connect with patients in hospital, residents in care facilities, their families and caregivers, and participants at charity events.

People who spend time in hospital or are in long-term care have very regimented days, and clowns and other entertainers break up the routine, says Linda Batdorf, spiritual care co-ordinator at CapitalCare Grandview, a continuing care facility.

Clowns take older people back to their childhoods, to a time when things were simpler, she explains. Some people respond with a laugh or a smile or their eyes light up.

One woman heckles Dizzy and two other Caring Clowns during a recent performance at McConnell Place West, a residence for people with Alzheimer's disease.

She looks so cross, sitting at the back of the room, dismissively calling the clowns bozos, turning down their repeated requests for help with their magic tricks, you wonder why she bothered to come.

"I have nothing against clowns," the 82-year-old says later, holding a balloon poodle Dizzy made for her. The heckling is all in fun, she explains, laughing. "It just makes the whole thing a little more exciting."

Other people may exhibit no response, "but later, one of their caregivers will notice that they're calmer, they seem more receptive to care and treatment," Batdorf says.

Batdorf was once a Caring Clown herself before getting her theology degree. On occasion, her character, Slip, still puts in an appearance at Grandview, she says.

"In acute hospitals, it's been shown that if you get patients to laugh, you can reduce their medications and things like that because of the endorphins that are released."

It's a two-way street. Entertainers get something out of it, too. "A lot of residents will say, 'Thank you for stopping and spending time with me,'" Batdorf says. "Time is our most valuable commodity and they truly appreciate that."

The Caring Clowns were founded in 1994 by Bud Salloum, a Shrine clown, and the late George McEwan. There are now 15 in the crew, most of them women who have volunteered or worked in hospitals or care facilities, Disler says.

Disler became a clown 16 years ago after medical problems forced him to retire early from his job as an automotive technician.

"I got involved to keep in a sane mind with my problems. It's helped me through my health problems over the years and keeps me out of the doldrums," he says. "If I put my red nose on in the morning, if I'm feeling bad, it perks me up."

Disler has been seen wearing his red nose while mowing the lawn.

He spends about 250 hours a year clowning around, mostly in long-term care centres and at special events for kids, like a recent Kids with Cancer function.

"Every year you get more confident in what you're doing, and it's practise, practise, practise. You can't just go out and be silly."

Every October, the Caring Clowns holds an introductory workshop to teach aspiring bozos everything they need to know. Details can be found at edmontoncaringclowns.ca.czdeb@thejournal.canwest.com

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