

A Edmonton clown's comic relief

MS patient Tracy Merry-Thomson is at peace when she performs — then, she says, ‘there is no pain, there is no disease’

By Chris Zdeb, edmontonjournal.com August 9, 2010



Happy the Clown (Tracy Merry-Thomson) gets a hug from a resident at McConnell Place West in Edmonton, Alberta, on July 14, 2010.

Photograph by: John Lucas, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON — Tracy Merry-Thomson has found a way to relieve her multiple sclerosis that has nothing to do with miracle cures.

She smiles.

“When you give somebody a smile, in that moment I’m not thinking about me,” she says. “I have no pain, no disease, no negativity at all.”

As an [Edmonton Caring Clown](#), who visits patients in hospitals and care facilities, Merry-Thomson smiles a lot. So much, in fact, that when it came to pulling together her clown persona and costume last year, experienced bozos advised her to not to paint a smile on her face.

Why, when you smile all the time? they said.

As “Happy” the clown, Merry-Thomson, 47, sports a red nose and a little heavier makeup than she normally wears, and that’s it.

A red hat with a sunny daisy sits atop her own titian-coloured locks, accenting a white tuxedo that she had a local graffiti artist paint for her.

Loud and outgoing — a friend calls her a Type A-A-A personality — she arrives at her gigs on a scooter. Kids think “it’s one hell of a cool clown car,” she says, but her mobility is so bad, Merry-Thomson needs it or a wheelchair to get around. She prefers the former set of wheels because it makes her look less disabled.

“It just looks like I’m lazy,” she jokes.

Bob “Dizzy” Disler, president of the Edmonton Caring Clowns, says Merry-Thomson is the first member in the group’s 16-year history to perform with the aid of a cane, wheelchair or scooter.

“I’m a million times more sick than I portray, but most people who know me don’t know my symptoms,” she says. “It’s not that I’m avoiding them or pretending they don’t exist, because I know they exist when I get up every day and I don’t want to get up.”

Standing up, putting toothpaste on her toothbrush and brushing her teeth, standing in the shower and getting dressed are hard, she says. “I’m in pain. I’m exhausted.”

She’s at her best until noon most days.

“I have the Cinderella syndrome,” Merry-Thomson quips. “At noon, my head turns into a pumpkin.”

At home, she’s a wall-walker, clinging to walls and furniture to get around.

“I walk in the house because I’ve accepted the fact that if I fall down, I fall down. I can’t live in fear of that,” she explains.

Multicoloured balloon creations, some finished, some still in the works, sit waiting on the coffee table and couch in the red-accented living room of the west-end home where she lives with husband, Rick, and her son, Nolan, 23. She uses a battery-powered balloon pump since her first clown outing, when non-stop use of a hand pump left her with severe shoulder pain and her doctor told her she couldn’t do it anymore.

She also does a little magic in her act.

Merry-Thomson used to sell photocopiers for a living before she was diagnosed with progressive MS during an insurance medical in 2001 after her vehicle was rear-ended. She thinks the accident accelerated the MS, because within months she went from being able to walk on her own — albeit with a dragging left foot late in the day — to walking with a cane and then being in a wheelchair.

The seeds for her becoming a clown were sowed when she volunteered to be an elf at a Christmas party.

“I had no idea how to be an elf, but I absolutely love to play and have fun.”

She had such a good time, she says she felt “ripped off the rest of the year. I thought maybe I could ask day cares if I could just come in and play. I had no plan except that I needed something beyond December.”

She connected with Caring Clowns through a friend.

“When you are praying for something that is good — not self-centred, but just good — it happens, as long as you have your eyes wide open,” she says.

She loves clowning.

“I would have given anything, absolutely anything to have any comic relief during (her own and her family’s medical challenges) because you can’t survive without it,” Merry-Thomson says.

But performing for 30 to 45 minutes takes everything out of her.

“You know how a woman can pick up a car off a child? That’s what I do every time I clown,” she says. “That’s why I’m still going, and that’s why I can be a Caring Clown.” Just not every day.

“I can do a maximum of twice a week and I can’t do that continually, it would be too much.”

Her son videotaped one of her shows once.

“I was so sick I could barely function,” she remembers.

“I watched the videotape and I couldn’t believe the person I was watching. The person on that videotape was having more fun than any other clown, had more energy, was more spunky.

“There is no pain, there is no disease,” Merry-Thomson explains, repeating her mantra.

She said it again recently, as she wheeled out of a care centre after a performance.

You could see the pain in her blue eyes, but she simply widened her smile: “There is no pain, there is no disease,” she said.

czdeb@thejournal.canwest.com