

## **Therapeutic Clown Program in Vancouver, BC**

### **Program Overview**

Formerly known as the Doc Willikers Therapeutic Clown Program, the current Therapeutic Clown Program in Vancouver, British Columbia operates under the Child Life Department umbrella at BC Children's Hospital (BCCH). It has served young patients at BCCH since 1994 and at Sunny Hill Health Centre (SHHC) since 1997. These programs currently employ two clown practitioners who make weekly rounds at BCCH and monthly rounds at SHHC on the wards, in clinics and in the ICU. Both programs were founded by Paul Hooson whose work was inspired by the renowned Big Apple Circus' "Clown Care Unit" (CCU) in New York City. Paul's vision and expertise in the field have not only defined therapeutic clowning on the West Coast of Canada but continue to shape the profession across the country.



### **Program History:**

Paul's first foray into clowning therapeutically began in 1976 at the IWK Children's Hospital in Halifax, when he paired up with a puppeteer to participate in a highly successful exploratory Child Life initiative using clown and puppetry for bedside visits.

This was a formative experience, and after many years of sporadically visiting hospitals and seniors residences while touring and performing with his clown-theatre company, Cirque Alexander, Paul decided in early 1993 to approach the B.C. Children's Hospital Child Life Department to develop a formal therapeutic clown program. Funding for a pilot project came from the Canada Council for the Arts, and "Doc Willikers", Funny-bone Doctor, D.O.D.O. (Doctor of Dis-Order), made his first appearance in March, 1994.

The character was an immediate hit with the children, families, and staff, and the program has come to be recognized nationally and internationally as a highly effective and innovative pairing of theatre and medicine.

The Canada Council funded weekly visits through 1995, at which time the Auxiliary of the B.C.C.H. Foundation took over. In partnership with private and corporate donors, it has generously sponsored the program ever since and has provided for the training and hiring of a second clown practitioner.

In 1997, at the invitation of Child Life Director, Fran Boyd, the Doc Willikers Therapeutic Clown Program was expanded to include monthly visits to Sunnyhill Health Centre for Children, where it once again proved to be a valuable addition. This facility provides rehabilitation and respite care for children with serious head injuries, seizure disorders, autism, and multiple disabilities.

In 2000, Canuck Place was added to the roster of facilities served by Doc Willikers, who became the first therapeutic clown in Canada to regularly work in a dedicated Pediatric Palliative Care Hospice.



In 2004, Paul approached long-time clown colleague Sand Northrup and invited her to join the Therapeutic Clown Program. Sand, a bilingual street performer trained in Quebec and mentored by French clown Cecile Truffaut, shared a similar approach to clown, based on building rapport and conversation with young audiences, rather than performance-based interaction. By 2005, Paul and Sand had created a successful workshop for health care practitioners on Humour and Healing and Paul went on to make Sand an integral part of the hospital clown team.



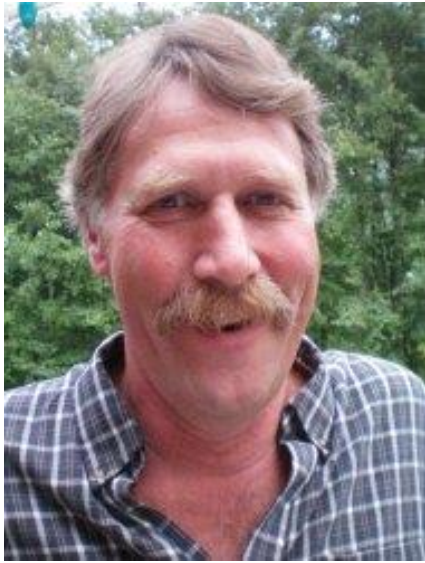
For the hospital context, Sand created "Fizzie", a PhryzzioTherapist whose unorthodox methods of testing patients for "funability" have endeared her to patients and staff alike. The program that Paul developed for BCCH is unique in Canada in that it requires that clowns visit all inpatient wards and outpatient clinics, working in both a solo and duo format.

In 2013 a new clown was trained and the program welcomed Melissa Aston and her character "Cosmo" to the troupe. Working with both Sand and Paul for almost a year before flying solo, Melissa is now a full-fledged member of the therapeutic clown team.



After 20 years at the helm, 2014 saw the retirement of Paul Hooson and Doc Willikers. His overly large shoes, while impossible to fill, still provide the footprints and markers on the path we tread. Sand has taken over as Director of the program which is undergoing numerous changes as the two institutions it serves (BCCH and SHHC) merge into one facility by 2017. Meanwhile, the program continues to thrive and plans are underway to train another practitioner and design an introductory course in Therapeutic Clowning, for the curious.

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Paul Hooson is a full-time professional mime, clown and puppeteer and a former student of Marcel Marceau. Since 1975, his career path has taken him to festivals, schools, and film and television studios as well into hospitals and hospices for young and old alike. This work has led him to intern with the CCU as a guest artist, perform and collaborate with others doing similar work in the U.S.A., France, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Australia, Brazil, and across Canada.



Sand Northrup is a bilingual clown, juggler, unicyclist and musician with 30 years of performing experience on festival and community stages across Canada. Sand currently teaches circus arts to thousands of elementary school students annually. She has offered hands-on circus workshops and camps to at-risk youth, high school leadership and physical education classes; on festival sites and to numerous drama and theatre projects. When Sand is not teaching or performing solo as One Woman Circus, she wears the hat of Director of the Therapeutic Clown Program at BC Children's Hospital and Sunny Hill Health Centre. Sand has been clowning in a hospital context since 2005 under the mentorship and guidance of Paul Hooson.



Melissa Aston aka Cosmo the DisOrderly  
Melissa was born and raised on Quadra Island, studied clown at the Clown Conservatory, San Francisco, CA, and later toured with Ringling Brothers Circus for a year on a circus train. She ended up in beautiful Vancouver BC as head clown of Kazoomco Productions. Melissa had the good fortune to meet Paul Hooson on a film set, both working as clowns, and joined the BC Children's Hospital therapeutic program in 2012. She is delighted to work alongside clown cohort and current head of BCCH Therapeutic Clown Program, Sand Northrup, aka Fizzie.