

This copy is for your personal non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies of Toronto Star content for distribution to colleagues, clients or customers, or inquire about permissions/licensing, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com

HAMILTON REGION

OPINION

Helen Donnelly, one of Canada's top clown artists and a driving force in country's therapeutic clown movement, dies at 53

Helen Donnelly was not just any clown. Trained in the Pochinko method, she was one of the best. She worked for Cirque du Soleil and Circus Orange and she was a driving force in Canada's growing therapeutic clown movement. She died at 53, Jeff Mahoney writes.

By **Jeff Mahoney** Spectator Reporter

Wed., Jan. 19, 2022 | ⌚ 3 min. read

🕒 Article was updated Aug. 22, 2022

[Helen Donnelly](#), who grew up in Dundas and became one of the country's premier clown artists, working for a time with [Cirque du Soleil](#), has died after a recurrence of the blood cancer she'd been fighting for three years.

Donnelly, who was 53, also worked for 10 years for [Circus Orange](#), the famous Hamilton-based spectacle/street theatre circus, as resident clown. She appeared with them at several Supercrawls and at the Calgary Stampede.

In more recent years, she became probably Canada's best known practitioner of and advocate for therapeutic/health care clowning, both pediatric and for the geriatric. She did pediatric therapeutic clowning at such places as Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital and Toronto's The Hospital for Sick Children.

One of her proudest achievements, says husband Neil Muscott, was having the therapeutic clowns asked to be involved in larger patient care strategy. "The clowns were actually often there during physiotherapy and sat in on some of the (medical staff's) rounds," he says.

Before that, she worked with [The Dr. Clown Foundation](#), focusing mostly on the elderly with dementia, as artistic co-ordinator and programs co-ordinator. She was a founding member of NAFHCO (North American Federation of Healthcare Clowning Organizations), started the therapeutic clown diploma program at George Brown College and had been invited as guest trainer for health care clowns all over the world, from Israel to Portugal, the U.S. and Canada.

She started out working in conventional theatre in Hamilton and later Toronto, acting and singing, studying drama at University of Toronto, doing summer stock — "Helen had a wonderful voice," Muscott says — before taking clowning classes in the late 1990s.



Once she started down that path, there was no turning back, he says. It consumed her. She studied and studied hard, in the Pochinko Method of clowning, with followers of the French master Lecoq. She learned under such clown teachers as David Shiner, Francine Cote, Roch Jutras and Grindl Kurchirka.

When she talked of the kind of clowning that she practised, the language and ideas she used, “koan”-like in tone, bridged the heady realms of philosophy, psychology, archetype and near-mysticism. “Fool”-ish? Hardly.

In a 2001 story in *The Hamilton Spectator* on her being chosen, from among thousands of auditioning clowns, to perform with Cirque du Soleil, in Boston and many other American cities, Donnelly said, discussing her training:

“The first stage is discovering your baby clown. Then you take in all the directions of the earth. Within each direction there are two selves – innocence and experience. The theory is that there are 12 basic characters, they all have their own stories and when you breathe in all 12 characters at once, out comes your clown. It’s very intensive.”

“We would joke at parties,” says Muscott, a photographer who also took some clown training, “and say to people, ‘And you thought clowning was nothing but fun.’ She was very serious about the ‘quality’ of clowning. It isn’t just about putting a red nose on your face.”

“She was (a) magical child,” says mother Fran Donnelly. “A happy, sunny child, she was her own entertainment and loved fantasy. On long family car trips she would have us in stitches with characters she made up, like Rubber Boots, Cellar Door and Mailman Mike.”

She was also an avid ballet student.

Muscott says that his wife complained of back pain in the late 2010s but it took a long time to diagnose her condition as multiple myeloma, a cancer of the blood. That diagnosis came in June 2019. It was advanced.

“We knew from day one it was incurable but as much as you’re prepared it is still a shock, but she had a good run, and she gained year with a clinical trial” that worked very well for her through most of 2021.

In the fall, though, the cancer came back and by the end, she needed to be hospitalized.

“We had wonderful care from Princess Margaret Hospital,” says Muscott.

The work that she started continues and grows, he adds. In places like Germany, there are hundreds of therapeutic/health care clowns, many in each hospital. Canada has lagged behind but that is changing, thanks largely to Helen Donnelly and the organization she started, Red Nose Remedy which advances awareness of, training in and access to health care clowning.



Jeff Mahoney is a Hamilton-based reporter and columnist covering culture and lifestyle stories, commentary and humour for *The Spectator*. Reach him via email: jmahoney@thespec.com

SHARE:

Copyright owned or licensed by Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Reproduction or distribution of this content is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited and/or its licensors. To order copies of Toronto Star articles, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com
