

# Therapeutic clown had ‘the best job in the world’

We at MAHCP would like to thank David Langdon for participating in our Q&A and we wish you a wonderful retirement! We're so grateful for your years of service as Hubert and Onni, and all you've done for your profession!

## What is the role of a therapeutic clown?

To begin, it is the best job in the world.

A therapeutic clown is a professionally trained clown artist who has in addition to their theatrical/performance skills, education and training for adapting that skill set for therapeutic intent in a particular environment, usually but not always a health care setting. My health care area was paediatrics, but there are many therapeutic clowns working with adults in care, seniors, refugees and other displaced or vulnerable people.

In my case, as part of the Child Life Department, a paediatric therapeutic clown shares the mandate to strive to reduce the stress and anxiety of hospitalization on children and their families. This work is not only diversional and entertaining for patients, but also therapeutic. Through a variety of play activities such as bubble blowing, face painting, magic tricks, music and mime, the clown offers the patients (and others present) experiences which are humorous, supportive and healing.

I see the therapeutic clown as a fellow pilgrim on the patient/sibling/parent/or staff member's journey. The clown is not there to “fix” anyone but to meet them where they are at. Having made space for where the “other” is at in the present moment, the therapeutic clown may propose through clown play opportunities to either explore what the other feels or to “re-calibrate” by moving on to something completely different. The therapeutic clown is led by the patient's needs and leads.

For example, through the therapeutic use of clowning the therapeutic clown allows the child to experience a sense of mastery and control while in the



David Langdon, therapeutic clown and MAHCP member, is retiring after three decades in health care. Photos courtesy of Sherry Treichel

hospital. He allows the child to make choices in their play, encourages creative expression and laughter, and communicates to children the message that they are well enough to be allowed some play time.

## When did you first begin your career?

I started as a therapeutic clown/child life specialist in August 1989. Previously, I had worked as a child life specialist at St. Boniface Hospital and was at that time teaching drama and performing in a clown troupe called Loonisee with Karen Ridd (Robo the Clown), who initiated the program in 1986 when she approached the child life department with her idea of creating a therapeutic clown program. In 1989 Karen suggested I apply for the job, which I did and found my calling.

## Have you seen a lot of changes?

I have indeed. My profession has really grown. There are now therapeutic clowns across the country in most major Canadian paediatric hospitals as well as working in other therapeutic environments. Worldwide it exploded

at the turn of the century. I was at an international conference in Vienna in 2018 and there were around 400 medical clowns from over 40 countries.

Closer to home, just at HSC alone there have been lots of procedural changes in 30 years. Day surgery handles so many procedures that might have been a one- or two-night admission decades ago. I recall there being a whole ward dedicated to orthopaedics and patients would be in traction for long periods of time. I don't know when the last time was that I saw a child in traction!

The treatment of many illnesses and conditions has greatly improved. The knowledge base and resources available to medical practitioners has really expanded in those 30 years. As a result, I think those that are admitted to hospital have need of more acute care. That really changes the landscape of patients' and staffing needs.

I have always believed hospitals are often the settings for movies, TV serials and books because, in reality, hospitals contain in a compressed form so much of the grand tapestry of life.

*continued on page 9*

*Continued from page 8*

Within hospitals there is a continual flow of people from all areas of society, needing or providing care which ranges from routine to critical. Great learning and growing grounds for someone that wants to serve others. In all this there can be a great deal of stress, controversy and conflicts. Because of this increased likelihood of encountering these situations I have found it is paramount to remain professional, respectful, attentive and teachable in order to serve one's patient's needs and not personal agendas. Whenever appropriate clown play can often diffuse the tension and help keep things light.

#### **What has contributed to the longevity of your career?**

There were a number of factors for this. I absolutely loved my work. It was a tremendous opportunity to practice my craft as a performing clown artist in a context of therapeutic service. I would not have retired unless "I knew that I knew that I knew" it was time for someone younger to step into the ring and bring their very best.

My colleagues both in Child Life and on the wards and clinics, who understood my role as a therapeutic clown and utilised the program either through ad hoc referral, consultation or direct collaboration were a key factor. As a result, my work was appreciated.

After a number of years, I was given a great deal of autonomy by my managers to develop the program, particularly by Rene Ethans who had supervised the program from its inception in 1986. As there were no other therapeutic clowns in Canada when I began in '89 I patterned my first therapeutic clown persona Hubert on Karen Ridd's work. In 2003, I introduced a speaking therapeutic clown Onri, who reflected new approaches to therapeutic clowning that had developed in other programs in the 90s and turn of the century. This really expanded the target ages of our program as well as giving me an artistic richness to my work which I needed after 14 years working in one style as Hubert.



I was also encouraged and enabled to do professional development throughout my career. Keeping abreast of what others were doing in my field or growing my skill sets was both a professional asset and a personal pleasure. I had the opportunity to write and teach in my discipline which was very rewarding as well. Child Life becoming part of MAHCP really contributed to this as well. I greatly appreciated the covering and support our department had through the union. Big kudos to Sherry Treichel, our departmental Member Advocate and everyone else at MAHCP.

#### **What are you most grateful for?**

I am most grateful for the people I got to know and work with during those years. Their trust of me, their confidence in me and my work meant a great deal to me; in addition to the great privilege it was to serve or to serve with them. I saw people at their very best either rising to meet great personal challenges or rising to help others meet those challenges.

Even now in retirement the impact is felt as they enriched my life. I know my mind, my heart, my very being have all been shaped for the better by so many of the patients, siblings, parents and staff I encountered. I suppose that's a very real and positive aspect of all that compressed humanity in healthcare settings, eh.

#### **Do you have any advice?**

Loving my work was huge for me. It is so important to engage in work one will be proud to do and genuinely love. Loving and respecting one's co-workers and the people you serve is important, too. If you have good healthy respectful relationships at work, then being there and working with and for people becomes a real pleasure. Seeing past one's patients' symptoms to see their humanity will never fail. Having fun is important too. It's like making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, you can't help but get it on everything.

Self-care is also paramount. It's like the cliché about putting your oxygen mask on before your child's. We are

cups that overflow with whatever is in us, so attending to our inner being is good for us and those we serve.

When going to those difficult (and to me they are often the most sacred) places I have always appreciated these words from Frank Ostaseski (*Exploring Our Intention in Service*):

*When the heart is open  
and the mind is still,  
when all attention is  
fully in this moment;  
the world becomes  
undivided for us,  
and we know  
what to do.*

I'd just like to thank everyone at Children's Hospital and CancerCare Manitoba for their kindness and generosity, not only on the occasion of my retirement but throughout the years. I miss you and have the utmost respect for you and the work you all do. May you all have long and rewarding careers.

