

# Hospital Clown Newsletter

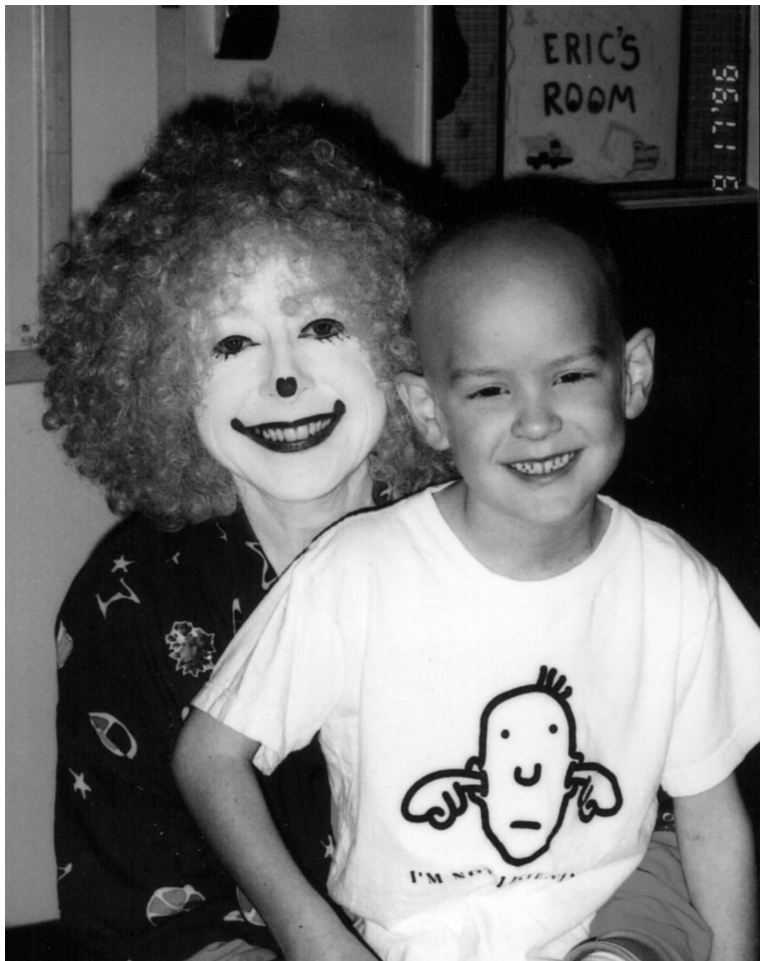
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**M**y clown, Posy, plays two days a week with the children and families in the Hematology/Oncology program at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children. Her world is not anybody's idea of a playground, but despite the seriousness of their illnesses, these children need to laugh and play. Indeed, the United Nations has declared that play is one of the Rights of the Child.

So how do we draw a child into play? How do we create with a child a play world that can offer delight, diversion and sanctuary during hospitalization and treatment?

Posy waltzes through life with a hop and a wiggle in her step. She wears her heart on her nose for all to see. She is irrepressible, but her love and uncertainty make her vulnerable. For her, each moment presents itself as



*Posy and Eric in play.*

an offering to be opened, explored and shared. Her presence in the hospital is an invitation to come out and play.

Posy's clown kit is simple and almost unchanging. It is as though she carries with her a vocabulary of potential play: Bubble bear and net bubble catcher, face paints, wind-ups, magnetic marbles, a plastic rain stick, small kaleidoscopes, stickers - the stuff of what I have come to call "the play conversation."

The word "conversation" implies an exchange of ideas through the medium of the spoken word - perhaps a strange analogy to use when describing the relationship of a child with a clown who doesn't talk. But the root word, "converse", comes from the Latin, *conversari* meaning "to live with" or "keep company with." And so the "conversation" Posy has with her friends is as much a keeping-them-company as it is a play dialogue.

Conversation also implies an equality of participants, and certainly Posy and her friends are equal players. If anything, the playtimes are led by the child, with Posy the willing follower.

In conversation, there is a give and take, a flow that passes from one to another. There is also a sense that the players in this word game are creating something new, the conversation itself. Once created, the conversation takes on its own reality, and can be revisited, amplified, or embroidered at the will of the speakers.

The "play conversation" is much the same. Like the child, Posy brings her whole self to the moment of the play. For her, it doesn't matter whether she is blowing bubbles with a child for the first time or the twentieth. As sure as can be, she will be amazed when the bubble blower emerges from the top of the bear. She will have difficulty co-ordinating her breaths with the presence of the blower. When she blows a big bubble, it will burst in her face, with predictable sputterings. The child will always succeed in popping all the bubbles with the catcher. The parent will have so many bubbles blown in her direction that she can't pop them all.

A child who has never met Posy before will hopefully be engaged and delighted. A child who knows Posy well will expect or demand all of these pieces of bubble play, sometimes commenting, "I like this part."

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## Play Conversation

Camilla "Posy" Gryski  
of Toronto, Canada

# "To be a Playmate . . . .

## Play Conversation

*(Continued from Page 1)*

Cory, in the daycare room, catches some bubbles then asks Posy to blow lots of bubbles for his mom. He knows from other plays that Posy always blows too many bubbles for mom or dad to catch. When the inevitable happens, Cory is pleased: "See, she does what I say." "Posy's under your thumb," says his mom. Cory's only answer is a big smile. For Cory, lying in bed receiving his chemo, there is not only the fun and the laughter but also the sense that some things can be controlled, even if you are only eight.

Sean is five. As his cancer progresses he is becoming weaker, so Posy and mom take over more and more of the play. Each day that Posy visits, she blows him some bubbles, then blows too many for his mom to catch. "Oh Posy, you played a trick on me," says mom after one such outburst of bubbles. Sean says confidently, "Posy never tricks *me*." He and his mom know the way the bubble play conversation goes. Sean knows too that he is special.

Sometimes, in the middle of the usual bubble play, something happens that takes the play onto another level. Laura, aged 6, is upset after "something that hurt" but she still wants to play with Posy and chooses the bubbles. As she is catching them, she stops and looks carefully at the net bubble catcher. "You could use it to catch fish," she says. Then she decides that the bubbles *are* fish. Suddenly, we are in an imaginary underwater world. Flotillas of bubble fish swim floating towards the net, and are swallowed up.

On another occasion, a young teen abandons the bubble catcher and begins to catch the bubbles in the mouth of his fuzzy bird puppet. Each bubble is caught with a squeak as the puppet closes its mouth. But is it the puppet or the bubble that is squeaking? Posy is totally charmed.

Children also anticipate and often remind Posy of the way things are to be. A small person sputtering in bed reminds Posy that a bubble has popped in her face, and she has inadvertently left out an important piece of the bubble play conversation.

The fluid nature of true play, like the give and take of good conversation, often allows wonderful variations to develop, which are then added to the repertoire or play vocabulary and used in



subsequent playtimes. Tom, who is 4, loves to play with Posy. Our playtimes are long and freeform - two old friends hanging out together. Tom prefaces each part of the play with, "How 'bout we play..." Posy, of course, always agrees. She loves to play anything, anytime.

Tom likes to blow bubbles himself, and Posy carries an extra bubble bottle for just this reason. This is the way we play. Tom has his bubble blower, which Posy wraps in a paper towel, because of the drips. Also because of the drips, Tom must have a towel draped on his lap. Posy must wrap her bubble bear with a paper towel and she must also have a towel to protect her clown pants from drips. One day a lovely game happens. Tom blows some bubbles, catches one on his bubble blower, then blows it to Posy. Posy catches it on the top of her bubble bear and then blows it back to Tom. Sometimes we blow bubbles at each other and catch as many as we can. It is quite magical, Tom's invented game of "bubble catch."

Tom, like many children, finds security in playing the same games over and over again. Repetition seems only to intensify his delight. One of his favorite games is a giggly one he calls "Bug's Life" because we use a small chirping plastic toy from the movie of the same name. The "play conversation" goes like this: "How 'bout we play Bug's Life?" Posy hands over the chirping cricket to Tom who hides it somewhere, usually behind his back, and makes it chirp. Posy cannot understand where the noise is coming from and looks everywhere, including under the bed and in the bathroom. Tom sits on his bed thinking up more and more places for Posy to look. Posy, the perfect playmate, never knows where the cricket is hiding. She even helpfully hands clean face cloths to Tom to help



# ... Is to Hold a Child in Your Heart." \*

him cover up the cricket, which she then can't seem to find. Nor can she find Tom, who is holding the cricket and making it chirp, when he is all wound up in the bed curtain. She does, however, stomp her feet loudly so that Tom knows where she is and when she is getting close. Sometimes dad plays too, and Posy must hide with Tom. Amazingly, for such a small person, he is always aware of his central line and tubing and makes sure that Posy stands in just the right spot. These games are great fun for both Posy and Tom and we are always reluctant to stop our play for the day.

Sometimes, a well-established play relationship can help to defuse a difficult situation. Posy arrives on the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit one day and immediately hears yells coming from the room of one of her friends. Annie's mom, in tears, is standing in the hallway with the social worker and the child life staff. Annie is yelling, "I want my mom," over and over again. Obviously there has been some crisis. They decide to send in the clown. Posy checks with mom: Is this ok with you? She nods. Posy can sometimes go where other staff can't. She's gentle. She demands nothing. She's comfortable with silence, and I like to think that she has a calm center. In this case, she listens, acknowledges Annie's distress, keeps Annie company, and opens up her box of toys. When Annie reaches out for her favorite wind-up monkey the immediate crisis is over and the play can begin. In a little while mom returns, and is drawn into the play.

There are also occasions when a child, understanding her needs better than anyone, can take the play with Posy and through it, transform her hospital world. Five-year-old Dianne has been a special friend of Posy's since her diagnosis. During her Bone Marrow Transplant, she became distressed at her rapid hair loss. Her mother acquired a pink clown wig for her and she became "Rosie" the clown. After she came out of protective isolation, "Rosie" and Posy paraded the halls of the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit hand in hand. One day "Rosie", having sent away her mother so that she and Posy can have their "private time", sets about changing her sterile environment. We go into the little transplant isolation room and "Rosie" closes the sliding glass door. She pulls down the blinds and turns out all the lights, creating a quiet, private space. One of Posy's toys is a pink plastic telephone with buttons that mimic the tones of a real telephone. "Rosie" begins to pick out random notes that create an eerie music, and she begins to dance. Posy, too, dances to "Rosie's" music. Two clowns, one big one small, in the middle of a busy hospital, dance in a darkened room. Dianne has created for herself a safe space, a sanctuary, and Posy is privileged to be invited to join her there. It is a moment, I think, that specialists in Human Caring Theory would call "transcendent."

As Posy's play conversations with her friends at Sick Kids continue, I work hard at making Posy the best playmate she can be. The children deserve no less.

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\* The title of this article is a quote from *Playing By Heart* by O.Fred Donaldson



Camilla Gryski is a trained Montessori teacher and holds a Masters Degree in Library Science. For 18 years Camilla worked as the children's librarian at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. During this time she wrote 8 books on string art and her latest book is entitled Let's Play: Traditional Games of Childhood. (Kids Can Press, 1995). Her interest in clowning was sparked by the Clown Program initiated by "Robo" Karen Ridd (featured in the Hospital Clown Newsletter V.3, No.2,) and Karen's successor "Bunky" (Joan Barrington).

However, the seeds for *Posy* were being planted for years. In Camilla's words: "*Posy* was a gift to me from my younger son, Damian. He went to circus school for 5 years, from the time he was eleven, and together we went to the Toronto Jugglers' Club every Tuesday evening. During his teenage years, he was a street performer who created his own comic character, Cosmo. So for years, I had been hanging out with jugglers and clowns. I also had a lot of experience as a storyteller, so I wasn't untested as a performer. And I certainly knew kids, having worked with them for twenty-five years as a teacher, librarian and visiting author. So I had the kid piece, and I had the hospital piece. I could juggle four balls. All I needed was the clown." Camilla took workshops and found Posy. She has worked at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children since 1995 and provides therapeutic clown services to the Hematology/Oncology program (in-patient, out-patient and Bone-Marrow Transplant Unit) and the Neurology/Trauma, and Pediatric ICU. Camilla can be contacted by email at [cgryski@echo-on.net](mailto:cgryski@echo-on.net).