

Just Clowning Around

The most wonderful thing you can share with others is the healing power of laughter.

by Greta Burroughs
Freelance journalist



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The Bumper "T" Caring Clowns reaches out and touches people — one soul at a time.

Top: Dr. Puff Muddle, Dr. Geezer and Dr. Shutterbug / Bottom: Dr. Curly Bubbe, Dr. Sing A Song, Dr. HuggaBubbe and Dr. Silly Goose



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Left: A young cancer patient proudly shows off her red nose. Right: Dr. Silly Goose and Dr. Geezer always have some tricks up their sleeves to get people laughing and having fun.

“The most radical act anyone can commit is to be happy.” — Patch Adams

Supporting a white doctor’s coat, a bit of bright make-up, and a large, red rubber nose, Robert Mason, aka Dr. Geezer, strolls down the wide hospital corridor handing out smiley stickers to the awestruck patients and visitors he encounters.

Making his rounds, Dr. Geezer pokes his head into a silent room. His appearance elicits a smiling welcome from the lonely occupant. At first glance, the doctor diagnoses the patient’s problem. She is suffering from the all-too-common ailment known as “hospitalitis.”

The good doctor gets down to business by examining his patient to make sure her funny bone remains intact. During the exam, he rambles off a few corny jokes to ensure the all-important appendage still functions properly.

As a final test, he delicately places a matching rubber nose on the young lady’s smiling face. If it elicits a giggle, Dr. Geezer knows his treatment has been successful.

It works. After some light-hearted conversation, Dr. Geezer bids farewell to his patient with the following words of wisdom:

You should be grateful for three things:

First, you’re in a great hospital. Secondly, you should be grateful for all the support you’re getting from relatives and friends. And, most importantly, you should be very grateful I’m not your real doctor.

Be a Clown

Bob Mason had no intention of spending his retirement years sitting around the house or playing golf. He wanted to do something memorable. Something positive. Something fun.

After studious contemplation, Bob discovered the perfect solution — clown school. He enrolled in Mooseburger Clown School in Buffalo, Minnesota, majoring in hospitals. Back in his hometown of Easton, Maryland, Bob made his debut as the hobo clown “Jus’ Bob” in 2000 when he began entertaining senior citizens residing in nursing homes and assisted-living facilities.

His big break came when he found an article in his local newspaper about Bumper “T” Caring Clowns, a volunteer organization dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of hospitalized patients and their caregivers through humor.

This nationwide program was founded by Dr. Bumper “T” Clown,

otherwise known as George W. Edwards. While visiting his father in the cardiac care unit at Cooper University Hospital in Camden, New Jersey, George arrived one day dressed in scrubs, lab coat and makeup handing out prescriptions for cheer. Thirty-five years later, Dr. Bumper T was still making his rounds, and in 2002 he decided to take his Caring Clowns program on the road.

Bumper T arrived in Easton with his novel approach to healthcare and needed volunteer clowns to work in the local hospital. Bob attended the meeting mentioned in the article and, without a second thought, signed on.

And Dr. Geezer was born.

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Soon after becoming a Caring Clown, Bob and his wife, Sherrie, packed up and moved to a coastal community near Charleston, South Carolina. Unfortunately, the program had not made it that far south yet. Undeterred, Bob began to send out queries to the hospitals around his newly adopted hometown offering his services as a volunteer — with a twist. He would introduce the Bumper “T” Caring Clowns program to Charleston.



With magic tricks, silly jokes and warm hugs, Dr. Geezer (Bob Mason) visits five hospitals around Charleston, South Carolina, bringing smiles to the faces of people who truly need it the most.

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Dr. Geezer inducts one of his patients as an honorary Bumper "T" Caring Clown by presenting him with an official Caring Clown red nose.

Intrigued, Joan Perry, director of volunteers at Bon Secours St. Francis Hospital, took the bait. She was hesitant when Bob first approached her but realized people are different and are comforted in a variety of ways.

"After following Bob and the Caring Clown team on rounds, it seemed to me comparable to a pastoral care visit," Joan says. "The clowns' visit and their gentle humor was simply another way to break the communication barrier and get people sharing and talking."

Joan was impressed with the way the Caring Clowns are taught to make every effort to be in tune with a patient's mood and sense their interest level.

"Many of the most successful visits are directed by family members who see the clowns in the hallways and know it would be meaningful to their loved one. The Caring Clowns have our whole-hearted support and welcome," she says.

Bumper "T" Caring Clowns

The nonprofit organization Bumper "T" Caring Clowns operates in six states with around 100 volunteers. The organization's president, Dr. Curly Bubbe (Esther Gushner), has been with the group since the beginning and claims she will never stop making her rounds as a smileologist.

"You don't have to be funny or do magic tricks to be a Caring Clown. You just have to be a caring, sensitive person and a good listener," she says, adding that it's a wonderful activity for seniors. "After we retire, we still want to be valued and appreciated. Doing this, you keep your body and brain active while performing a good deed. It's

so rewarding to have someone walk up and thank you for a hospital visit you made years ago."

Bob says he is a Caring Clown with a 'capital C' for caring: "It's not about me. I'm not an entertainer; there's no juggling or balloons."

Instead, his approach is directed toward providing one-on-one support for the patients and their caregivers. "The most precious gift one person can give to another is attention, and that is what I try to do," Bob says.

He always asks permission before entering a room. "Some people may not be in the mood for visitors, and other people are afraid of clowns," Bob says, adding that it's important that the occupant is receptive to having him as a guest.

Reading a room is a skill Bob mastered when he joined the Bumper "T" program. "I learn so much by taking in the details of the room and the people inside. Are there any flowers and cards? Does the patient look happy or sad? Any loved ones there? Every situation is different," he says.

Open-ended questions allow the patient to direct the conversation. "It should be 70/30 with the patient doing 70 percent of the talking."

Some folks are excited about going home and up for jokes and magic tricks. Others are unsure what the next day will bring. They're scared, lonely, and need someone to talk with. "In that case, I offer a compassionate ear and a shoulder to cry on," Bob explains.

As he departs, Dr. Geezer always has a trick up his sleeve that will leave the room a little brighter than he found it. He recites "the three things you should be

grateful for" or hands out a prescription for happiness. "Take one smile before breakfast, two hugs after lunch, and one kiss at bedtime." If a spouse is in the room, he adds, "And it's OK if you OD on that last one."

The Rewards Are Priceless

When asked what he gets out of his work as a Caring Clown, Bob replies, "I have the satisfaction of starting Charleston's Bumper "T" Caring Clown program from scratch and being able to watch it grow and make an impact on our community."

Most of all, he cherishes his work. "It's given me something memorable to do during retirement. Having the opportunity to be with people in hospitals, showing compassion and helping them in a moment when they're in a difficult situation is priceless," he says.

His caring spirit doesn't stop at the hospital. Bob and Sherrie travel a lot, and they always bring along some of Dr. Geezer's smiley stickers. They have walked around cities in South Africa, India and Europe handing out the stickers to children and adults.

The response is the same as in the hospital. "It's nice to put a smile on someone's face," Bob says. "We may not speak the same language, but a smiley sticker is universal." ♦

Learn more:

Dr. Geezer welcomes emails from anyone interested in learning more about Bumper "T" Caring Clowns. Email him at rgmason@goeaston.net.

Learn more about the work of the Caring Clowns at bumpertcaringclowns.org.

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