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## women who make a difference

(Clockwise from left): Mz. Glamure (Mary Anne Sinclair), Izzy the Dizzy Cheerleader (Ricki Whittle), Mini the Mermaid (Linda Strong), the Biker Babe (Debbie Trexler), Jester (Lou Kennedy), The Tooth Fairy (Julie Guillot), Madame Flutterby (Nelda Martinez), Captain America (Mary Lynne Rhodes), Ms. Astor the Disaster (Iris Lehrman), Raggedy Jan (Janet Jones) and Tina the Ballerina (Laurie Plant).



By William M. Hendryx

# Send in the Clowns

## Laughter Is the Best Medicine

**h**er anxious mother only steps behind, a frail little girl, age four, wandered along the sterile hallway of Driscoll Children's Hospital in Corpus Christi, Texas. A rolling IV stand towered over her, and her round, dark eyes—though beautiful—were aged beyond their years, the result of a lengthy battle with childhood disease. She stared straight ahead, with no trace of childly delight.

That was about to change. Rounding a turn near the nurse's station, the little girl encountered a dazzling array of color and whimsy in the form of three clowns.

*Contributing editor William M. Hendryx lives in Dallas.*

They appeared to have just stepped from the circus ring, their costumes exotic, their makeup fanciful.

The child paused momentarily, absorbing what she saw. Mz. Glamure, a.k.a. Mary Anne Sinclair, was larger than life. She looked like a pink, glittery version of the Cat in the Hat, complete with size-18 shoes and brightly striped socks. Madame Flutterby (Nelda Martínez) flaunted lavender hair and sparkling wings trimmed in gold sequins. Mini the Mermaid (Linda Strong) had seashells in her flaxen hair, and her body was adorned with giant pearls.

Gently, knowingly, the three experienced clowns edged near the little girl and knelt at her side, offering a small toy, a bit of silliness,

sincere encouragement and genuine warmth. Madame Flutterby then spread her golden wings and embraced the child. "Now make a wish," she whispered. As she did so, a precious smile—the first in many days, according to her mother—replaced the girl's solemn expression.

"That's the payoff," says Mary Anne Sinclair, founder of a group known as Clowns Who Care. "That one smile makes everything worthwhile." The organization began in 1995 while Mary Anne was undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer. "I was never fearful about the cancer," she says. "My husband was very supportive, and that helped tremendously. But it certainly was a wake-up call. It was time to get my priori-

ties right." Since childhood, she'd loved clowns, Red Skelton in particular, and dreamed of becoming one. "They bring happiness into people's lives," she says. "What better gift to give someone?"

Mary Anne found a reputable clown school in Houston and commuted there once a week for three months, with the plan to use her new skills at Driscoll Children's Hospital. On the day of her last class, she was having lunch with friends and said she had to leave early to attend her graduation from clown school.

At first her friends were unable to imagine that such an attractive, dignified woman—best known for her high-fashion clothing designs and her philan-

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thropy—would actually do such a thing. “They thought I was crazy,” says Mary Anne, laughing. But when she explained her plans for the children, her friends became intrigued. Almost immediately, six of them joined in Mary Anne’s quest, attended school, and became the founding members of Clowns Who Care.

The group has since grown to 18 active clowns, with another four on sabbatical, plus a waiting list. They range in age from mid-40s to mid-60s, with an assortment of occupations that includes a physician, teachers, politicians, a mediator, president of a real-estate title company and a few homemakers.

**e**ach member of the group came up with her own theme for a clown persona, including such novel ideas as Goody 2 Shoes (Chris Adler), Rodeo Rose (Beverly Batey), Ms. Astor the Disaster (Iris Lehrman), Izzy the Dizzy Cheerleader (Ricki Whittle) and Jester (Lou Kennedy). Based on their ideas and input, Mary Anne, whose clothing designs have appeared in well-known stores such as Neiman Marcus and Bergdorf Goodman, then designed the costumes and had them stitched by her seamstress.

“We’ve gotten pretty elaborate with our outfits over the years,” says Mary Anne, but she emphasizes that it’s not necessary to go to such lengths. “Anyone can do this,” she says. “Moms have been making Halloween costumes for their kids for years, often on a shoestring budget. They could do the same for themselves. Just grab some nifty

fabric and let your imagination run wild.”

The makeup is another matter. It can take two hours or more to put on a professional-looking clown face, and it’s best to know some special tricks of the trade. After all, applying three-inch eyelashes isn’t something one does every day. “But that’s just window dressing,” says Mary Anne. “This is all about the kids, and we never lose sight of that.”

Twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, several of the clowns head for the hospital. (Mary Anne notes that this same concept would work equally well at other facilities, like nursing homes.) While there the clowns visit every floor and every child who is not too sick to receive them, spending several minutes with each. They also spend time with worried parents who are willing to talk. It’s an exhausting day, but the reward is immeasurable—for the children, the parents, the hospital staff and for the clowns themselves.

“We get as much out of it as the kids do, maybe more,” says Mary Anne. “You’re worn out when you finish, but you don’t care because your life is so much richer.” The clowns spend a lot of time with the parents because they, too, are suffering, says Mary Anne. Many parents stay with their children, sleeping anywhere they can find a spot, even if that means the car. “They’re worn out and they’re worried sick,” says Mary Anne. “We help them any way we can.”

Chris Adler, a founding member of Clowns Who Care, currently serves on the Board of Regents at Delmar College. “I recall the first time I clowned with



Lou Kennedy (Jester) shares a Polaroid souvenir with young patient Luis Leal.

“This is all about the kids, and we never lose sight of that.”

Mary Anne,” she says. “I went into a room alone, fully costumed, and a woman was there just getting off the phone. She was sobbing, so I went over and put my arms around her. ‘What’s wrong?’ I asked, afraid of the answer. She said, ‘I just found out my two-year-old does not have a brain tumor.’ We sat and talked, both crying tears of joy.”

Sharon Bedford, a long-time volunteer at the hospital, escorts the clowns on each visit, Polaroid camera in hand. The film is provided by the hospital, and every child who wants one (and they all do) gets a copy of his or her picture with the clowns. “Many times,” says Bedford, “we’ve entered a room where a child is upset. But the attitude changes in a blink when the child sees the clowns. Tears turn instantly to smiles when they walk through the door.”

Tim Hanners, vice president of volunteer services at the hospital, agrees. “Every time they come, it’s like a vitamin-B shot to the entire facility—kids and staff alike,” he says. “They help us remember that we’re a

very special facility, where kids still need to be kids.”

Driscoll Children’s Hospital is a nonprofit, 200-bed facility dedicated to children. It serves all 33 counties that make up South Texas. More than 6,500 children a year are admitted.

Mary Anne explains, “I didn’t put this group together. God did. They’re a very special bunch of women.”

Indeed, an unexpected bonus is the close sisterhood that has blossomed among the Clowns Who Care. Through thick and thin, through family illnesses and death, these women support one another. “They don’t ask what they can do,” says Mary Anne, “they just show up and do it.”

“Working with the children has taught each of us one good thing: the infinite value of simply making someone happy.” **FC**

For information and suggestions on starting a Clowns Who Care group in your area, contact Mary Anne Sinclair, P.O. Box 22, Corpus Christi, TX 78401.