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“Pakita”

Rita Smith Barrett

When the Clown Doors OPENED

By Rita Smith Barrett

PHOTO BY RENAE SMITH

Rita Smith Barrett, known professionally as “Pakita,” clowns for patients and their families at Randall Children’s Hospital at Legacy Emanuel in Portland, Oregon. A native Oregonian, Rita was born in the same hospital where she now performs. For the past six years, she has also infused her clowning skills—including improv, drama, and humor—into her other job as a high school Spanish teacher at Portland Adventist Academy.

Her family’s first contact with clowning was through Rose City Clowns in 2001. “We joined the year of a regional conference hosted by our local COAI alley,” she says, “so we were immediately surrounded with high-quality clowning.” Her son Nate (“Bobo”) quickly picked up clown skills and won a Junior Joey award from the alley.

The next year, Rita and her son volunteered to produce the alley newsletter. She asked him, “Do you want the newsletter to be incredibly prompt or incredibly good?” He insisted that it was going to be both, and they won several COAI “Best of Press” awards.

“My favorite part to work on was the alley member bio that I wrote each month,” Rita recalls. “The interviews gave me a chance to get to know each member and to hear their stories of how they became clowns and what the alley meant to them. I’ve found that each clown has an inspiring story to tell.”

Rita’s own story is an inspiration not only for those involved in caring clowning, but for all of us who need to be reminded from time to time of the “why” of what we do.

“How about shortwave radio?” my husband, Mike, asked our thirteen-year-old son. Nate shook his head. “Building stuff?” Another negative. We were trying to help Nate find a new hobby. He’d outgrown Legos, cars, and other toys, and we wanted to help him develop interests besides knowing how his favorite NBA team had done that week.

We didn’t come up with anything in our brainstorming. Things that sounded fascinating to me were “boring” in his book, and Mike’s suggestions didn’t sound like things Nate would be good at. We realized we were focusing on skills and interests Nate *didn’t* have and were making him feel frustrated. Mike and I talked later and

agreed that we were stumped. “We’ll just have to pray about it,” he said.

A couple nights later, I couldn’t sleep and got up to look for a book to read. As I walked into the living room, the word “clown” suddenly popped into my head. It wasn’t an audible voice and I hadn’t been thinking about my son, but I was positive that God had just given me

the word for Nate's hobby. However, I didn't know any clowns and I went back to bed wondering, how does one become a clown, anyway? I was afraid to mention the idea to Nate until I had a plan. What if he reacted the same way he had to the other things we'd suggested?

The following day, I looked over the two dozen entries under "Clowns" in the phone book. I wanted to find someone who could help Nate get started in clowning and be a good mentor. The clown that I called referred me to Mary Pat "Lucky" McCoy, a COAI member who talked to me for half an hour about all the opportunities to learn clowning in our area. As she talked, I thought, "Yes! That's Nate!"

I told my son what I had found. A big smile filled his face, and he said, "That's sounds cool!" Our new clown friend hooked us up with a weekly juggling club and invited us to Rose City Clowns, an alley in Portland, where we met other clowns at their monthly meeting.

Nate proved a natural for clown skills and quickly learned to juggle, ride a unicycle, and tie balloon animals as "Bobo the Clown." He received the alley's "Most Improved" award at the annual banquet and the following year was chosen "Junior Joey of the Year."

We discovered that our clown friends were committed to excellence in their art and would generously share their skills, tricks, and favorite jokes. Many members of Rose City Clowns are professionals; some have toured with circuses or worked internationally. But members also serve our community through volunteer clowning.

In his first year as a clown, Nate helped with a Red Cross blood drive, entertained families at a picnic for the blind, and clowned at a Christmas party for children with cancer. I enjoyed watching Nate help out at these events, but soon I wanted to get in on the fun, too! When Rose City Clowns



Top: Mensa (Rita's clown name at that time), Mick (her husband Mike) and Bobo (son Nate) pose for Clown 101 graduation photo, 2002. **Bottom:** "Who's the hero of the story?" The little patient pointed out, "The rubber chicken!" PHOTO BY RENAE SMITH



Mensa and Bobo at Clown Camp, 2005. "My original clown name was a bilingual joke," Rita says. "The family of one English-speaking patient might recognize 'Mensa' as the society for high IQ types. A Spanish-speaking family in the next room would just laugh, knowing the word in Spanish means 'fool' (and 'bobo' is a synonym)." Rita changed her name when an orphanage in Guatemala cautioned her that "mensa" was too strong of an insult there. "Now I'm 'Pakita,'" she says, "a play on my mother's Spanish nickname and a tribute to her legacy of humor."

offered a Clown 101 course, Mike and I signed up together with Nate. The eight-week class taught us the basics of make-up, costuming, and skills such as ballooning, juggling, face-painting, and magic. The three of us performed together for our Clown 101 graduation, a church talent show, and a family reunion. Mike and I were looking for a hobby to suit Nate's gifts and character, but we found the whole family could have fun with clowning.

One day, as Nate and I were driving home from an event, I looked over at my red-nosed son sitting next to me. I thought, "I am the luckiest mother in the world, to be able to play and have fun like this with my teenager!" Clowning was not just a hobby for my son; it was a way for us to spend time together during his middle and high school years. Our fellow clowns were role models for Nate and showed him that grown-ups could be a lot of fun. When Nate went away to college, he put away his red nose, but the confidence gained from his experience in clowning stayed with him.

Meanwhile, my other son, Josiah, had already opened the door to a totally new clown experience for me. Josiah was born with multiple handicaps: blindness, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and other problems

that required many hospital stays and surgeries. Once, Josiah was in the hospital for two and a half weeks. The days stretched on endlessly, and when there was nothing to do for Josiah, I felt bored and lonely. I knew other patients and their families must feel the same way. "If I ever get out of here," I vowed, "I am going to become a hospital clown!"

Not long after, Rose City Clowns offered a Hospital Clown course. Nate and I completed the course and visited patients together at Randall Children's Hospital. During one visit, "Bobo" and I saw a little boy in the Children's

Emergency Department, who was still crying after having a large cut on his forehead stitched up. When we walked into the exam room, his eyes widened and he was transfixed as we did our shtick. His mother, who had stepped out to talk to the doctor, returned to the exam room as we were leaving. The little boy bubbled over with excitement as he told her what he had seen. His concern about his cut forehead had faded and his tears had dried. Now he could only talk about the *clowns!*

We visited patients for several years through the hospital's Volunteer Services Department and when Nate went away to school, I did my rounds solo. Josiah had many health crises and surgeries during those years. Once when he was recovering in another hospital, I planned to cancel my clown rounds. Then I thought, "I can't do anything to help Josiah, but there are children I can cheer up today at Randall Children's Hospital." Leaving Josiah with his dad, I went across town to my hospital. My visits that day were cathartic for me. Somehow through the smiles of the children I visited, I felt my own son's joy.

Because music had an almost magical ability to ease Josiah's chronic pain, singing with my ukulele became an important part of my clown routine. Even babies and children with handicaps that make it difficult to see or understand a magic trick can enjoy the silly songs I



Rita with Josiah, who opened the door to her hospital clowning and "taught us so much about finding joy in hard places."

RANDALL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

LEGACY EMANUEL



Top: Warming up for clown rounds in the Pediatric and Children's Emergency Departments. PHOTO BY RENAE SMITH **Middle:** The real magic trick was keeping the little patient from handling the color changing scarves—a big concern for hospital clowning. PHOTO BY RENAE SMITH **Bottom:** First graders shriek with laughter as Mensa and Andrew "Fancy Pantz" Timofti perform "Banana Bandana" as part of PAA's "Club Payaso" bilingual clown ministry troupe. PHOTO BY REGINA WOLLRABE

sing. Sometimes I don't realize the impact my simple routine has. As I played my ukulele for a handicapped girl one day, her grandmother shouted excitedly to the nurse. "Come look!" Grandma said. "She's moving!" I hadn't realized that the little movements her hands made in response to the music were a minor miracle for her.

Josiah lived much longer than any doctor had imagined, but at age twenty-three he passed away. A few months later I returned to make my rounds at the hospital. During one visit, as an art therapist waited with me outside a patient's room, I saw the teenager lying in his bed, surrounded by a wheelchair, leg braces, and tubes—all equipment that

had filled my home until recently. The boy was Josiah's size and had the same brown hair, the same spastic movements, and made the same noises. "That's my son," I told the art therapist. She knew of Josiah's recent death and told me I didn't have to go in if I wasn't up to it. "It's okay," I said, "I know just what to do for him." We entered the room and as I sang for this "Josiah," the teenager in the bed smiled and laughed. It was a good day.

The year after Josiah's death, my second hobby, teaching Spanish, led to a job at a Christian high school. My personas of clown and Spanish teacher often merge in this gig, with clown skills evident in my energetic Spanish class. A couple Rose City Clown friends, Regina "Cha Cha" Wollrabe and her sister Tina "Gadget" Flores, and I trained a group of my students to do clown ministry, and I always do a clown show when I take my students abroad for short-term mission projects.

With my teaching came work on a master's degree and certification requirements, and my visits to the hospital became sporadic. Suddenly I realized it had been more than a year since I had clowned at the hospital. I tried to get onto the schedule, only to discover the hospital had cancelled the volunteer clown program! However, my fellow Rose City Clown, Albert "Clem" Alter, clowns at Randall Children's Hospital through the Artists in Healthcare Program. I filled in for him during an extended absence and, on his return, he and the hospital offered me a monthly slot in the schedule. I was back to making rounds, now as a hospital employee.

Sometimes in my hectic life, I wonder if it's a good use of my time to be a clown. What do I really accomplish in such brief visits with patients? But I've found that being a clown offers a unique opportunity to make a connection with a child. The red nose offers an open door to another world. To a healthy child, that is a world of fun, silliness, excitement, and joy. For the children I visit, it is a chance to leave behind their pain and worry and enter my goofy little clown world.

HOSPITAL CLOWNING

A Dual Perspective

I rarely step “out of clown” in the hospital, but one mother was persistent in her questioning. “Are you a doctor? Are you a nurse?” She seemed to want to know why I understood her daughter’s condition so well. Finally I caved. “My own son has cerebral palsy. We’ve lived in hospitals.” Being Josiah’s mom has given me a unique perspective. Here are some things I’ve learned both as a caring clown and as the parent of a child in the hospital:

We bring our life experience with us in our clowning. I don’t understand every patient’s condition and needs, but what I’ve learned from caring for my son—and from other relationships—impacts who I am as a clown. Seeing patients and medical staff as real people helps me to connect with them.

We entertain the whole family. Sometimes a hospital stay is full of stress, decisions, and worry. But waiting for doctors, waiting for recovery, and just plain waiting, can make hospital days drag by for family members as well as patients. A father in the Children’s Emergency Department thanked me after I told one of my magical stories, saying, “I really enjoyed that, too!”

We bring joy, but the hospital is a very serious place. Medical professionals carry the weight of the patient’s care on their shoulders and we shouldn’t get in their way. Sometimes patients or family don’t feel like smiling and may not want to see a clown. Respect that.

We need to tone it down in the hospital. A great piece of advice I got in the hospital clowning course is to match my speed to the patient’s breathing. I get quieter and slower when working with a very ill or shy child.

We can spread new diseases to patients who have compromised immune systems. Follow hand-washing guidelines and wear a clown costume that can be washed after every visit.

We can validate the worth of every child. As I came into a patient’s room, I was surprised to see the baby had no forearms. I made smiling eye contact with him and sang, “I Think You’re Wonderful” and the affirming “ABC’s of You,” commenting on the baby’s musical appreciation to the parents. I like to find something special to mention about a child, remembering how I loved people who could see past Josiah’s handicaps and realize what a beautiful child he was.

We should be well trained. The many books, Web sites, and classes available on hospital clowning can help us offer top-notch service. Even volunteer work deserves nothing less than our best!



A magical ending to the story made this patient waiting in the Children’s Emergency Department exclaim, “How did she do that?!”
PHOTO BY RENA SMITH

One day I visited a little girl who was so sick she could not move. She was hooked up to many different tubes, and her father gently held her small hand through the bed rails. Although her dad invited me to come into the room, I didn’t think she could really appreciate my visit. I was doubtful as I asked if I could play my ukulele and sing her a little song. She barely nodded assent. I sang softly, and as I finished she whispered, “More.” I played another song, and again came the barely audible, “More.” After my third song, I told her a little story and went on to see other patients. As I walked down the hospital corridor, her faintly whispered “More” rang in my ears—a reminder to me of the power of the clown, in the midst of pain and fear, to bring a spark of joy.

Rita Smith Barrett, who clowns as “Pakita,” may be reached by e-mail at barrettsrus@hotmail.com.

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