
OUR HISTORY

In the summer of 2006, Peter Gayed, the current director of Funny Bones at Yale, and Amy Downing, current director of Funny Bones at the Medical College of Cornell University, volunteered with Clown One Italia, an Italian organization founded by three social activists, street performers, and longtime friends of Patch Adams, the physician-clown made famous by Robin Williams in a movie of the same name.

During that trip, Peter and Amy traveled through Sicily with 22 other clowns from Russia, Japan, Canada, Holland, Sicily, Italy, and the U.S. The group spent time visiting and clowning for hospitalized children, adult oncology patients, mentally and physically disabled adults, abused and neglected youth, and elders in hospice.

On their return to the United States, Peter founded Funny Bones at the University of Illinois, Amy founded Funny Bones at the Medical College of Cornell University, and a mutual friend, Justin Ziemba, initiated Funny Bones at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.

The University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine clowns for the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, the premier pediatric research hospital of this country. The Medical College of Cornell attends to patients of the New York Presbyterian hospital.

CLOWNING AS SERVICE

In one form or another, clowns exist in nearly every culture. They are an embodied form of laughter, joy, and happiness.

Perhaps the single most recognized accoutrement is the clown's red nose. It is this feature that anthropocentric clowns call the "ticket in".

Time and again, we are amazed by how readily we are welcomed into a patient's room and life. Clowning not only elicits a strongly positive response from patients, but it also has profound benefits for health professionals.

When the physician, for example, relieves himself of the guise of invulnerability, he may engage with the sick patient in a way that the culture of medicine does not allow. With a red nose on it becomes easier to show affection, to give someone a sincere hug, and to laugh, smile, and enjoy life in the face of illness.

By providing service as clowns, future doctors, nurses, physician associates, and public health professionals learn to engage the sick meaningfully. By attending to patients as clowns, health professionals learn to acknowledge and bear witness to suffering, hope, and joy.



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FUNNY BONES
at the yale school of medicine!



THE PURPOSE

The purpose of Funny Bones is to restore a sense of worth and control to each patient, despite their illness, level of cognitive competence, and age.

We do this by using a model of clowning known as *anthropocentric clowning*. This method places the patient at the center of the experience instead of at the periphery as a mere observer.

Our goal is not merely to entertain but to engage our patient in a playful and meaningful way. For patients in the hospital, this involvement is uniquely empowering. It provides them with an opportunity to regain control of their immediate surroundings—something that is often lost in the day-to-day regimen of the hospital.

Depending on the patient's physical and mental health, we can achieve this in a number of ways:

- Two clowns may “get stuck” in a doorway and look to the patient for verbal instruction.
- One clown might “transform” another clown into a giant balloon and ask the patient to “direct” the clown's movement with a gentle touch or by blowing softly.
- Instead of painting a patient's face, we may ask them to paint ours.
- We may pretend that the floor of the patient's room is too hot for our delicate clown feet! We might stand up on a chair and ask the patient to suggest ways to get from one end of the room to another.



THE PEOPLE

The clowns of Funny Bones are graduate students and faculty members of the medical, nursing, physician associate, and public health schools of Yale University, all of whom are HIPAA-certified, trained in infection control, and immunized in accordance with the standards set out by the Yale-New Haven Hospital.

To become a clown a volunteer must undergo training and participate in regular clowning exercises in which they refine the following skills:

- Improvisation with a partner clown
- Recognizing and reproducing theatrical emotion
- Animating an inanimate object (e.g., giving “personality” to a desk lamp)
- Proprioceptive and extra-proprioceptive awareness

The training program for Funny Bones was developed by Selena McMahan, a graduate of Bowdoin College who was awarded the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship for her international clowning project “Contemporary Clown Circuit: Performances Across Borders.”

Active chapters of Funny Bones are in place at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and at the Medical College of Cornell University.



THE MODEL

Our model of clowning is one that is employed internationally. Below you will find excerpts from influential clowning organizations that inform our praxis. They describe their work in these words:

- “A sick child in a hospital is someone with no power—she is small, she is sick, people are doing things to her body, and she cannot leave or tell them to stop. A clown arrives and suddenly there is someone in the hospital who will do whatever the child asks.” (Clowns Without Borders, San Francisco)
- “Our goal is to minimize the dread of the hospital environment, and to teach children, their families, and the hospital staff that humor and fantasy can be a part of life even in the hospital.” (Le Rire Médecin, France)

The model of anthropocentric clowning not only guides our behavior and interactions but also influences the way we dress and costume ourselves.

As anthropocentric clowns we wear very little makeup, if at all. Our skin is natural. Our smile is genuine. Our hair does not puff out in a rainbow-colored explosion. Our costumes are not extravagant, nor are they fashioned from Martian-like synthetics. More simply, we believe that it is easier to relate to our patients if we look more human.

The Funny Bones clown is approachable, humble, and always willing to serve.