

More Than Just Clowning Around



Paul Miller is always on the ball when it comes to entertaining kids in the concourse area.

Pay close attention over at Burnet Campus these days. You may see a guy in crazy plaid pants and goofy suspenders walking on a big red ball. Or patients balancing peacock feathers on their hands. Or a parent spinning a plate on a pole. No, you haven't gone to the circus, but the circus has come to Cincinnati Children's.

A group called Circus Mojo has recently begun visiting CCHMC, thanks to funding by the Co-Operative Society and the efforts of the Division of Child Life and the Department of Development.

Circus Mojo is the creation of Paul Miller, whose official title is one an 8-year-old might dream of: motivational clown. Miller's organization performs professionally at events and offers classes, workshops and summer camps teaching circus arts to youth and adults. In addition to that, they offer a program they call Mojo Medicine, where they provide circus-like entertainment to patients and families in hospitals.

Using the concourse as their midway, Miller and his artists will visit the medical center at least twice a week for the next year to make patients smirk, smile and laugh out loud as they juggle, do hat tricks, perform slapstick comedy and balance chairs on chins. As badged contract employees, the performers are able to visit a variety of areas around Burnet Campus on their own, including the concourse, cafeteria and Emergency Department and clinic waiting rooms. Child Life will escort them for special visits to inpatients, which they see on a referral basis. They'll also be visiting College Hill Campus regularly.

Results so far have been incredibly positive, according to Child Life operations coordinator **Lisa Hall**. "Everyone truly

loves them," she says. "It's great to see the smiles on the faces of a family who hasn't smiled for a long time."

Laugh It Up

"We get pretty neat results in a short amount of time," says Miller. "This is something that engages the whole family. It's a huge relief valve for families to laugh."

That laughter is what Miller goes for.

People can tell right away that something's up when they see him in his derby hat and ridiculous pants, pushing a cart full of eye-catching props in front of him. It often starts with a look from a skeptical



Miller gets tickled by young visitors in the cafeteria.

patient trying to figure out what this guy is doing. That leads to a half-smile, which Miller quickly latches onto. Within minutes he's got that patient and those around him giggling and joining in the fun.

Combining performance, comedy, tricks and physical skills, Miller and his team always make sure the families are involved, such as by juggling rings back and forth around a patient or teaching a skill like plate-spinning. "We like to be able to give the kids something special at the hospital, besides the scar or cast they'll receive," Miller says, referring to the experience, the memories and the smiles they give the patients and their families. "When we teach kids a new skill, it gives authority to the child." And Miller especially likes it when the kids catch on to something quickly – say, balancing

a peacock feather on one finger – while nearby a nurse or doctor trying the same skill struggles with it. "It levels the playing field for just a few minutes," he says.

Beyond the Big Top

Miller comes from a long background of performing, with a degree in theater from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, followed by a job as a clown with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. But what he and his fellow artists are doing at Cincinnati Children's is more than just clowning around. It's called medical clowning, and Miller has practiced it previously at Texas Children's Hospital and at hospitals in Chicago.

Clowning therapy is a concept that has been gaining traction in recent years; the University of Haifa in Israel even offers a three-year degree in medical clowning. Miller aspires to learn more about this discipline as well, having recently obtained a grant to begin studying the effects medical clowning has on patients. (See sidebar.)

Historically, Miller says, the very first clowns – jesters – could taunt authority without repercussions. Modern-day clowns still do the same. Miller and his team do this by scolding the staff when they catch employees watching their act. "Hey, get back to work!" he'll exclaim. Though it's all part of the show. These clowns are happy making anybody laugh – from patients and families to employees to other hospital visitors.

Laughter and humor is universal. Whether a family is in for a routine check-up or is waiting for a complex surgery to begin, these circus acts serve as a distraction and a delight. So don't be surprised when you see one of these clowns carrying on. And be prepared: If they catch sight of your smile, you may just find yourself pulled into the fun.

Medical Clowning Research Opportunity

Paul Miller, creator of Circus Mojo and a professional motivational clown for 15 years, recently obtained a grant to study the mental, physical and emotional effects his performances have on patients. He's interested in expanding this research. If you'd like to talk to him about this project, contact him through Circus Mojo's web site at www.circusmojo.com.