



Barbara Bird Creating Universal Smiles

COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo

Photos by Super Source Media and from Barbara Bird

Barbara Bird knew from a very young age that she wanted to help people feel better. Little did she know that someday she'd be wearing a red nose to do it!

Starting life in the Midwest, Barbara was born in LaCrosse, WI. During her early years, she also spent time in Wisconsin and Illinois. After her parents' divorce, Barbara's mother took a teaching position at a private school and decided to work her way up the career ladder. She worked toward her master's degree while teaching, and once she completed that, they moved to Muncie, Indiana for

her first college faculty position when Barbara was in fourth grade. They settled there until Barbara went away to college herself.

At five years old, Barbara knew she wanted to be a nurse. She adopted to the culture of Indiana and grew a passion for basketball, car races and local tomatoes and corn. She also played the violin. Once she was old enough, she took a job as a candy stripper and was a nurse's aide by the age of 15. She graduated from the University of Michigan with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, became a lifelong member of her sorority, Alpha Chi Omega, and worked her way to becoming a Nurse Practitioner (NP). She felt she had landed in the right

place at the right time, becoming one of the early NPs in 1973, and took her new role very seriously. "Being a nurse practitioner gave me the expertise and opportunity to bring excellent health care to a greater range of patients. I appreciated the license to make decisions based on knowledge and training in an expanded role. When it was a newly emerging field of health care it was also important to me to prepare for and pass a national certifying examination that demonstrated that I had the knowledge and skill required for the professional practice that I lead."

She worked for a while at a clinic in Catskill before accepting a position as a consultant nurse for the NYS

Department of Health. It was the mid 1980s and she was living in Red Hook, NY with her three children, one in college and two in high school. The hour plus commute each way was getting to be a bit much, so after the youngest entered college, she found a lovely new development here in Clifton Park/Halfmoon that had a townhouse style that appealed to her, and she has been a resident of Clifton Park ever since.

In 1995, she formed her own consulting practice in health care management, which she ran for 20 years, helping her health care clients to create practices that ran smoothly and efficiently. She also had an interest in humor therapy, and when a colleague informed her in 1993 about clown school classes at Schenectady County Community College, it seemed natural for her to give it a try.

Humor therapy, also known as therapeutic humor, involves finding a way to bring smiles and healing to patients using humor to relieve the pain and stress that accumulate during a diagnosis and improving the patient's sense of wellbeing. Barbara quickly took to this new style of caring for others and developed four clown personas. She is most known for "Sparky" and "Dr. Nose-A-Lot." Since completing her initial classes in 1993, she has attended many workshops, conventions and competitions. She naturally excelled and won the Clown of the Year, 2011 through the Clowns of America International.

She expanded her reach throughout the years and is now actively involved with the Electric City Clown Alley, which is a wonderful source of sharing and continuing education for the members. Barbara explains that, "A clown alley is a club, called that because in the circus days, clowns were not given dressing room space, so they had to drag their trunks into the space between the tents, called alleys, to change and put on makeup."



The membership of the Electric City Clown Alley stretches from Oneonta to Saratoga Springs. Barbara served on the executive committees when they hosted the regional clown convention in 1999 in Albany and an international convention in Saratoga in 2002. She also participates in the Caring Clown unit that visits area nursing homes and assisted living facilities and is often seen doing face painting at local events. As Dr. Nose-A-Lot with Clowns On Rounds, she visits patients at Ellis Hospital, Ellis McClelland and Sunnyview.

A natural born leader, she was a founding member of the Red Nose Response following Hurricane Katrina. The Responders use their compassion and comic relief to help after natural or manmade disasters occur. Through this organization, she has had the opportunity to help at a shelter in neighboring Waterford and travel to Prattsville twice after Hurricanes Irene and Lee. She was also one of the clowns invited to the event in Newtown, CT two weeks after the horrific shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Right now, Red Nose Response is restructuring the organization to reflect the current


needs of responding and organizing trained teams of responders with full background checks so they will be prepared for the next event.

Barbara wishes she could do more but is so grateful for the role she has been able to play in bringing smiles to people's faces. Her favorite aspect of her job? "Being able to meet people and help them smile and forget, even for a moment, what is bothering them. That beneficial effect is experienced by patients, staff, visitors and volunteers at the hospitals."

Besides clowning, Barbara enjoys spending time with her family when she can. She lives with her husband, Alan Sternstein. Her children, Elizabeth Lincourt and William Bird live with their families in W. Lafayette, IN and Ann Arbor, MI respectively. She has four grandchildren ranging in age from 20-29.

Barbara loves to cook and enjoys taking cooking classes when available. She also enjoys travelling and is hoping to continue her international adventures soon. The next few places on her wish list are New Zealand, Australia, Norway and Costa Rica. In the meantime, she loves all four

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seasons right here in the Capital District and all the fun activities the area has to offer during each one. This fall she is looking forward to heading to Northampton, MA for the Paradise City art show and to a trip to Rochester Institute of Technology for their homecoming/ family weekend. 2020 is shaping up to be an exciting year in her family with her sister celebrating a milestone birthday, her oldest granddaughter getting married in April, and her younger granddaughter graduating from Indiana University in May. Barbara will also be attending this year's clown convention in Niagara Falls, NY.

She believes that the way to live a long and happy life is to stay active and involved. A long life definitely runs in her family! Her great grandmothers on her mother's side lived to be 90 and 85. Her grandmother lived to 99 and her mother lived to be 106! Barbara's favorite mantra is "What made you



happy today?" Her next goal is to get and train a therapy dog and to remind people what a positive thing clowns are despite the challenges that the scary clown movies have provided. "Because of that type of characterization, we have to be ready at all times to demonstrate that we are real clowns, not nasty people who wear a mask, that we do no harm and we have the very big heart of a clown."

Clowning has brought many rewards both for Barbara and for her

patients. "My years of clowning have given me what I like to call a mini vacation because I put on that face, the costume, my red nose and my shoes to have a new me emerge and a playful one. I find that the red nose is universal. I was able to experience that firsthand in China, at a small school in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, in Germany and, most recently, at an indigenous village in Costa Rica. Everyone, young and old, knew what to do with the red foam noses I handed out. And they laughed a lot. You see, a smile is also a universal language."

To hire Barbara for your next event, contact her at bbird2@nycap.rr.com. ■

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