



Clowns

on Rounds

BY JENNA CAPUTO | PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY MARIE BECK & LORETTA DEANGELUS

It's tough to find yourself as a patient in long-term hospitalized care. Anxiety and fear surround your care plan as well as your family that cares for you. Time and again, however, humor has been proven to not only help with stress levels but also with pain management and overall mindset.

Local clown, Marie Beck, knows this firsthand, and her clown alter-ego, "Mischief," inspired her nephew, Mike Reagan, to create a program that has helped hundreds of patients since it began 28 years ago. After seeing how "perked up" his grandmother was after Marie visited her in the hospital, he joined a clowning class himself. He attended a lecture on hospital clowning, then job-shadowed a hospital clown before writing a program proposal for the New York Clowns on Rounds, a non-profit corporation that is still successful in our area today. "Our purpose is to encourage hospitalized patients to have a positive attitude toward their illness," explains Clowns on Rounds program director, Loretta DeAngelus. "Through humor, we help to alleviate the fears, anxieties and stress experienced by patients, their families, friends and caregivers. Clowns on Rounds provides

professional entertainers disguised as clown doctors to hospitals, rehab centers and nursing homes. They transform their regular acts and props into medically-related routines and tend to poke fun at conventional procedures, thus diffusing some of the anxieties and fears expressed during treatment and long-term care."

"Hospital clowning is very rewarding, but it's also very draining, because you never know what you're going to see," says Marie. She has been involved with Clowns on Rounds since the very beginning, often taking a day off from her then full-time job with the State to work at a local hospital as her other clown personality, "Dr. Funnybones," when she was needed.

Marie always liked to play from a very young age on. She was a part of the art and drama clubs at her school and could usually be found dancing to Elvis and early rock & roll music. She wanted to be an actress and looked up to actors like Red Skelton and Carol Burnett. But at 26 years old, she found herself divorced with five kids to support, so she took whatever jobs she could find – Tupperware dealer, waitress, toy warehouse packer – be-

fore going to school to learn secretarial skills. This led to a job with New York State in 1973, first as a secretary, then working her way up to an auditor, and eventually, a day care licenser.

But performing was still in her blood. After watching a friend perform at a church bazaar after taking a clowning class, Marie had lots of suggestions for her. Her friend invited her to put on some makeup and join her at her next gig. Before long, they were getting calls for birthday parties and many other events. "I was so hungry to learn all about clowning and what to do that I took every class I could locally," says Marie. "Then I started right away attending clown conventions, going a couple of times a year, some on a regional level, some on a national level. I have gone all over the country. I have gone to many weeklong clown camp events and met and became friends with many famous clowns." She also joined local clowning and magic clubs as well as the Clowns of America International (COAI) and the World Clown Association (WCA).

Meanwhile, Loretta was a registered nurse working in the ICU at Ellis Hospital until she decided to switch tracks and stay home while her family was growing up. One day, she took her children to the Carl Company in downtown Schenectady during a "Circus Days" promotion, where she saw a man making balloon animals and was intrigued. She had the kids get one so she could bring it home to figure out how it was made. "I knew that I would someday be able to do this," she says.

At the time, Loretta was also a Girl Scout leader for her daughter's brownie troop, and the local chapter offered a Clownology Patch, in which they could learn how to become a clown, including how to dress, do the makeup and make balloon animals. "After that class I was bitten



by the clown bug," says Loretta. "That was over 38 years ago and I still love clowning!"

When she first started clowning, her husband, Jerry DeAngelus, didn't think it would last. "He never admitted to anyone that I was a clown," she explains. "One day I had a birthday party to perform at, but my car wouldn't start. I borrowed Jerry's car and off I went. Later that day a friend of my husband's told him he thought he saw a clown driving his car on Union Street. My husband vehemently denied it. Needless to say, after 30 plus years, he has accepted my profession and actually says he is proud of me!"

Like Marie, Loretta also attended many conventions and classes and joined the COAI, WCA and local organizations. When Mike approached her about joining Clowns on Rounds, she was initially hesitant, so he invited her to go with him to see how it all worked. "I then saw the value of clowning in the hospital," she says. "I realized that I could still be with the patients, which is what I loved best about nursing." She says her favorite part of the job is being able to touch the hearts of so many people and make them happy. "I was a nurse, but I became a 'doctor' – 'pretending physician,' not 'attending physician,'" she says. "Through Clowns on Rounds I am able to add a pleasant distraction for patients and staff that I come in contact with."

Marie agrees that touching people and bringing smiles and laughs to "children" of all ages is at the heart of their passion. "One person or 100, it does not matter as long as we all end up smiling," says Marie. "I like





Loretta's family

to play with people the same as I liked to play as a child. Clowning is a way of reaching the child in people of all ages – day care to nursing homes and everything in between.”

Loretta and Marie met each other on a bus heading to perform for Niska Day. “Loretta was teaching an after-school program at my husband’s school,” says Marie. “He introduced us, and we have grown in our relationship as clown partners as well as great friends. We picked each other’s brains and did a lot of brainstorming in developing our characters. We were both relatively new at clowning, so we were glad to find someone with the same passion.” The two have been “clowning around” together ever since, often appearing as a duo at the same gigs.

They each have multiple characters, depending on where they are playing. Marie is most often known as “Mischief,” “Dr. Funnybones” or “DeLight of the Lord.” Loretta is usually seen as “La*Dee*Dah” or “Dr. Gigglebritches,” but also plays “Starlight,” “Speechless,” “Droopy,” “Princess Delphira,” and at Christmas time, “Miss L. Toe” and “Mrs. Claus.” They both have won several prestigious clowning awards on regional and national levels, including “Clown of the Year” and “Excellence in Clowning” from the COAI, and in 2019, Marie also received the “Lifetime Achievement Award” from COAI.

While clowning takes up a lot of their time, these two women also enjoy other organizations and hobbies. Loretta belongs to Ladies of Charity, and Stitch of the Heart and One Stitch At a Time (knitting groups that provide handmade clothes and supplies for people in need). She is also a part of Mount Carmel Women, and enjoys crafting, gardening and being in her kitchen, as well as attending her granddaughters’ activities, going to Proctors and eating at the local restaurants. Marie enjoyed her role in the Christian clown group called the Joyful Joeys, took dance and art classes, and loves to read and spend time with her family and dogs, and just enjoy time at home.



They are both very close to their families. Loretta, who came from a large family herself, has two children (plus their spouses), three granddaughters, and her dog, Bombolina. “My parents instilled family values, faith, good work ethics and respect in us,” says Loretta. “I believe in family life and preserving tradition. It is very important that I stay in touch with my immediate as well as my extended family.” Family support was instilled in Loretta from her childhood. “I was close to my Mom. She was always my biggest supporter and she never failed to tell me how proud she was of me and how happy I made her. She loved to see all the characters I came up with!” Her friends are a part of that family closeness as well, as she has stayed in touch with 12 high school friends for over 54 years, getting together for a monthly dinner for the past several years.

Marie has five children and Jerry has three children. Together they have 14 grandchildren,

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along with their two dogs and a white Netherland dwarf bunny, who has starred in many shows with Marie. "Our family is a very close-knit group. We have a lot of family events and we enjoy each other. We all support each other with love, laughter and encouragement."

Loretta and Marie both look to positive affirmations as a guide to help them through life. "Be kind to one another. Kindness is a language that the deaf can hear and the blind can see," says Loretta. And Marie is reminded every day that, "There is nothing going to happen today that God and I cannot handle together."

They are ready to continue spreading smiles to help everyone throughout the pandemic, and in the meantime, they wish for peace in our future and a coming together for our country. "Learn to live and let live," says Marie. "People are too critical and don't know how to forgive and love one another. Too much anger and bickering in this country, and we really have so much to be thankful for. There is no other country I would want to live in and I'm grateful for the opportunities I have had and hope that we could find peace even with our differences. We really are a blessed nation!"

They feel fortunate to have found their passion in life and urge others to never give up searching for that as well. "Find out what you are passionate about and go after it!" says Loretta. "I was fortunate enough to have found clowning, which enables me to bring joy to others and I receive so much joy in return."

"My advice is always to seek God's plan for you," says Marie. "He gives us all gifts. Find out what you like, what you are good at, and make it part of your life. What is your gift? Don't get stuck just making a living doing something you hate. You will enjoy your job if it is where your heart is. I believe, especially as grandparents, we have so much to share and pass on to the next generation – our wisdom, our love and our talents. Be true to yourself. Enjoy each day! You only go around once. Each day is a gift." ■



Marie's family

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