

Hospital Clown Newsletter

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“Dr. Stubs” (Michael Christensen) and Carmelo

Michael Christensen is Founder and Creative Director, Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit® program. He has lectured at the Humor Conference in Saratoga Springs, New York; the Danish Humore Conference in Kolding, Denmark; Tel Aviv University, Israel, and the European Conference on Clown Doctoring held in Muenster, Germany. For his work with the CCU, Michael has received the Raoul Wallenberg Humanitarian Award, the Red Skelton Award, the Parenting Achievement Award from Parenting Magazine and the Service to Mankind Award.

The one ring circus arena is quiet and empty. The lights are dim, then slowly, shyly a hobo clown shuffles out into the open. He hesitates, looks mournfully up at the audience, then slowly brings something out of his pocket. He looks up at the enthralled audience again, then back to the little bottle in his hand and back at the audience – magical silence. He opens the bottle and pulls out a stick and gently blows bubbles. With slow wonder he watches the bubbles float up to the seats. *Mr. Stubs*, the hobo clown, has totally captured the audience.

Out steps the ring master, “You can’t do that here!” *Mr. Stubs* looks sadly up at the audience, then down at his shoes. He slowly and methodically takes a few steps to another part of the ring, brings out his bubbles and blows them to the crowd.

“I said you can’t do that here!” The ringmaster shouts. *Mr. Stubs* again looks down at his feet, moves to another spot, and blows his bubbles. Finally, enraged, the ringmaster grabs the bubble bottle, marches over to a trash can, lifts the lid, throws the bubbles in the can, and marches out of the ring.

Mr. Stubs looks sadly up at the audience. He shuffles over to the can, looks up at the audience again and then timidly picks up the lid. Bubbles float out of the can! As *Mr. Stubs* reaches to pop the bubbles, each pops with a musical note. He continues to pop the bubbles creating a little tune and dances to the music he is making. Then he puts the lid on the can and waddles out of the ring.

This is the “*Mr. Stubs*” who co-founded the Big Apple Circus, that became the gentle clown doctor “*Dr. Stubs*” who founded the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Units®.

[Photos by Scot Thode]

Dr. Stubs, Michael Christensen, of
The Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit®

The Big Apple Circus – Committed to Kids & their Families, not for profit.

Michael Christensen was born in Walla Walla, Washington. He discovered the theater at the University of Washington. In 1974 in a barn of an apple farm in Kent England, Michael and a friend Paul Binder crafted a comedic juggling act that featured, among other exotica a rubber chicken. “Paul and I juggled on the streets of Europe, a couple of young vagabonds having great adventures. Then, in Annie Fratellini’s circus, we found our destiny. We were mesmerized by that circus: we were part of a totally uplifting, lighthearted, wonderful world. No script or pretense.” That direct, visceral, unpretentious, joyful contact between us and the audience became one of the signature elements of the Big Apple Circus.

Michael and Paul returned to America to create a classical circus, one that would bring people together – regardless of their points of view – into one gleeful community. The Big Apple Circus debuted in 1977 in a tent in Battery Park in Lower Manhattan. Today it remains the intimate one ring circus and performs in its own 1,700-seat big top tent. This year for three months they will set up at Lincoln Center in New York City. [The big apple being a nickname for New York City].

“[Our] vision of using artistic excellence [is] to remind children and adults of the positive emotions people possess. In doing so . . . we celebrate human possibility. The intimate, single-ring tent in which we perform is critical to that interchange. Because every one of our seats is within 50 feet of the ring, our audience members are more than observers; they are participants. And because seating is in the round, they share their joy not just with the performers, but with each other as well – and that further heightens the experience.”

The emotions we trigger are based in the very roots of the circus – the last remnant of ancient festivals when people celebrated, in a very primal way, a good harvest, the joy of survival, triumph in battle, Circus is that kind of ritual, but within a frame of beauty, so it’s absolutely exquisite or extremely funny. Circus people make dreams come true. And in the classical one-ring circus, you see it right in front of you; you can touch it.

– Dominique Jando, Associate Artistic Director

Each year a new show is created around a specific theme. The 1999 theme is the old English Music Hall expression “If you are happy off stage, you will be happy on.” The show is called “Happy On!” It is produced by Paul Binder and the international cast is directed by Guy Caron and Michael Christensen.

This is the performance, dedication, and professionalism that supports the Clown Care Units®.

For Michael it was the death of his brother that was the motivating force behind the beginning of the Clown Care Units. When he was a boy, he idolized his older brother, Kenneth. That relationship grew with time. In 1985, Kenneth contracted pancreatic cancer and lived only four short months. “When he died, I was filled with feelings of grief, of course, but I also felt an

even bigger commitment to service. I put myself on my knees. I was totally and utterly lost. From that place, I gave in and said, ‘what do you want me to do? Just let me know. No contract or deal.’ It was total surrender. Call it love and caring, God, a higher consciousness – whatever – I wanted to give my life to that.”

That year Babies and Children’s Hospital in New York City asked him to perform for kids who had survived heart surgery. For the performance he got a white coat and realized he had a use for the old fashioned doctor’s bag his brother had given him a few months before he died. The doctor who was master of ceremonies of the event gave him a great introduction as the new head doctor. So there was Mr. Stubs now Dr. Stubs heading out into his ring only this time the ringmaster was the master of ceremonies -- the “straight man” and the ring was a room full of kids in various stages of wellness.

Dr. Stubs shuffled out and said he would make a few changes in the hospital. “From now on you can eat whatever you wanted as long as it was part of the four major food groups: popcorn, chocolate, soda and beer.” The playful irreverence for the authority figure of the doctor was as natural to Dr. Stubs as Mr. Stubs had been to the ringmaster.

Now Dr. Stubs can be seen with his colleague clown doctors shuffling down the halls of the hospitals. Dr. Stubs gets his name from his “hairy” legs. Actually it’s flesh colored tights with short pieces of brown yarn sparsely coming out. This is comic theater costume for “hairy legs” His old fashioned brown medical bag is full of bells, bubbles, juggling balls, rubber chickens, plastic fish and he is full of tricks. He will test an arm or wrist and at the same time crush a clear plastic cup under his armpit, which makes a terrible crunching sounds. “Doesn’t sound so goooood” Dr Stubs analyzes to the delight of everyone.

He delivers riddles and jokes with the complete deadpan of his hobo character. With other clown doctors he gives kitty cat scans, nose transplants, and sings lots of nonsense songs -- all creating a merry interruption to a usually terrifying day for a child. But there is much more to Michael than the funny clown. I remember when I was nervous about going to the hospital for the first time at Moose U. He didn’t say the old cliches “It’ll be all right” He stood up and gave me a big hug! That’s Michael. His compassion is in his action and it exudes with every child and adult he meets.

Several studies have been done at Babies Hospital to determine if the clowns actually have an effect on the children. The results are not out yet. But to the clowns and to Michael they can see their efforts in the eyes and smiles of the children. The Clowns come into their lives and create a spark of hope with laughter. Then they go on their way, often never waiting around to see the results of their endeavors or where the ripples of their work reach.

Here’s the Doctor’s version of the ABC we all made up with Michael at Moose U several years ago. “ABCD EKG NOP on your IV, ICU, UC me, CCU RN MD, now I know my ABCs, we can charge outrageous fees.”



The Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit®



Three to five days each week, 50 weeks per year, these clown “doctors of delight” are examining children’s funny bones in their white coats (with Clown Care Unit® in red on the back). There are 64 clown doctors in ten hospitals (see below) They all assume silly doctor names as Dr. Loon or Dr. Ginger Snap and work in teams of two or three, with a supervising clown on each team.

These are not volunteers, they are skilled performing artists (magic, mime, juggling, musicians), who audition and are chosen for their sensitivity, as well as, their clown skills. They receive six months of supervision and training, learning proper hygiene and hospital procedures.

They are salaried though the Big Apple Circus, a nonprofit organization. Funding comes from the hospital, Big Apple Circus performances and fund raising. Each hospital’s Chief of Pediatrics reviews the CCU’s activities. The clowns visit children in pediatric services throughout the hospitals, including intensive care units, emergency rooms, physical therapy, and acute care clinics.

The Clown Care Unit® operates in Children’s Hospital, Boston; Children’s Hospital and Regional Medical Center, Seattle; Children’s National Medical Center, Washington, D.C.; Yale-New Haven Children’s Hospital; and six New York City Hospitals:

New York Presbyterian’s Babies & Children’s Hospital, Columbia Presbyterian Campus, Harlem Hospital Center, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, Mount Sinai Medical Center; New York Presbyterian Hospital, Cornell Campus and Schneider Children’s Hospital of North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System.

There are affiliated programs begun by CCU-trained clowns in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Paris, France, and Wiesbaden Germany.

They plan to expand to other children’s hospitals in Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Houston. Auditions will be announced in local newspapers.

Besides the **Clown Care Unit®** the organization has a program called **Circus for All!K** which distributes more than 50,000 free and discounted tickets to economically or physically challenged children enabling many of them to experience the excitement and wonder of the Circus for the very first time.

Another program is **Circus Arts in EducationK** which teaches circus arts to thousands of inner-city school children ranging in age from eight to eighteen, fostering discipline, self esteem and teamwork.

The Big Apple Circus, 505 Eighth Avenue, NYC 10084

Dr. Stubs and me Carmelo's Story

The story of Dr. Stubs and Carmelo appeared in a 1990 Life Magazine article entitled "Send in the Clowns." This is a summary of the original story by Brad Darrach. Photos by Scot Thode.

"Get out of here!" "Just get out of here!" Carmelo raged at the meek hobo clown that knocked at his door. But, Carmelo was no little boy! At 14 years old Carmelo measured only 43 inches and weighed 41 pounds. He had the body of a 5 year old and a raging spirit to live.

At three years old, Carmelo had serious kidney problems, then one of his lungs collapsed after which he had recurring bouts of pneumonia. At five, he was treated for high blood pressure and at six he had a stroke. At eight he came down with epilepsy and developed a heart condition. At 10 he received an extra kidney, but 5 months later his immune system rejected it. Two years later hoping to control Carmelo's blood pressure, surgeons removed his useless kidneys. This put Carmelo on dialysis. At this point Carmelo's natural mother left the scene. As a ward of the state Carmelo spent two years in New York's Babies Hospital.

But Dr. Stubs also has a tenacious nature. Twice a week for the next two months, Michael showed up, blew bubbles, juggled and sang funny songs. Carmelo ignored him. One day Michael sensed a bit of interest from Carmelo, so he left his phone number with the nurse. A few days later when Michael was not at home his wife got a call "Is Dr. Stubs there? This is Carmelo. How ya doin'?"

From then on Carmelo was enthralled by everything the clown doctors did. As part of their "jobs" the clown doctors engage the children into their clowning. Dr. Doctor (Mark Mitton) incorporated Carmelo into a magic act. "Carmelo, you're an incredible actor!"

"Yes! I am! I know I am! I act all the time: I think of all the things I would do if I were healthy and I act them in my mind. I pretend." For forty-five minute Carmelo exploded with all his pent up desires and dreams.

"You know, we could use a talented actor like you in the Clown Care Unit." Dr. Doctor thought out loud. With widening eyes Carmelo gasped "Oh, I'd love to be a clown."



So when the question was put to Dr. Stubs he pensively said "The problem is, you're in a wheel chair."

"But you know I can walk!" Carmelo said proudly. (He had not walked for eight months.) With terrible determination he stood up and tottered toward Michael on rubbery legs.

Dr. Stubs gave in "We'll start you at one dollar a day."

"Heck" Carmelo responded "I'm goin' be a very good clown. I should get two dollars a day." And he did.

For Carmelo, joining the Clown Care Unit was like joining the human race: it gave him a reason for being. "When he gets his pay, it's better than a blood transfusion." At sixteen, although he has not physically grown, he has expanded emotionally. "This hospital is like a house and these doctors and nurses are like a family. Everybody knows me here.

One day when Michael was putting on his makeup Carmelo said "I look just like you, only smaller." Then he looked up at Michael with his large eyes, "Does that mean you're like, my dad?"

Carmelo's health improved with his spirits. He put on weight, took walks around the ward and played along with his clown doctor friends. But in December of 1988 Carmelo's heart stopped on two separate occasions. As Carmelo remembered. "I cried 'cause I was thinking I was gonna die and I not wanna die! I not wanna lose my friends. The clowns be like my brothers and sisters and I love them very much. So I willed myself to stay alive! And after I got better and Michael was putting my clown makeup on, I told him I loved him very much."

"Dr. Hector are you ready?" Michael asks Carmelo. "I'm hot to trot!" Down the corridor they go, big tramp pushing little tramp. "Hey, Michael let's give 'em 'Pop Goes the Weasel" Michael blows the tune on his "oxygen tuba" and Carmelo provides the "Pop" (a syringe had been fixed to make a pop when the plunger is pulled out).

Carmelo goes over to a 12-year-old boy. "I'm Dr. Hector. I'm gonna test your eyes. Can you see this fish?" He holds up a foot long plastic fish. "Well, come closer" "See it now?" Well come reeeeeeally close." When the boy gets close enough he gets squirted with a jet of water from the fish. Everyone yelps with surprise and delight.

Then Carmelo's dad rounds the corner. Dr. Hector gets a mischievous look in his eye. He starts to whimper. "Hey, Dad Look what that mean old nurse did!" He points to his left forearm. The father comes close and leans over Carmelo sympathetically, only to get a whoosh of water in his face. Carmelo laughs so hard he almost falls off his wheelchair. The father seeing Carmelo laugh begins to howl. All the children laugh. Any staff in squirting range get splashed. They all join in the fun.

Carmelo got to go home, and under the watchful and loving eye of his step-mom, he had the healthiest period in his life. Carmelo stills has his job. "Mom, I gotta go to work today, he says. The clowns can't live without me." So every Monday an ambulette transported him to the hospital, where Michael painted his face and took him on rounds. "Me and Michael, we really had 'em rolling today!"

In January of 1990 a dialytic connection surgically implanted in his left thigh became inflamed. Carmela came down with pneumonia and was rushed to Babies Hospital. The infection stubbornly resisted treatment with antibiotics. Even though Carmelo was very sick he insisted upon making rounds with Michael in his wheelchair. He clung desperately to his dreams "There's so many things I wanna do!" I wanna learn to read. I wanna write a book

about being a clown. I wanna be on TV and tell how that it feels to be me. I wanna kidney so I can urinate like other people."

In mid April without warning Carmelo's liver shut down and he looped between delirium and semicoma.. The clowns stood around him in tears, Michael holding his hand and talking to him.

Suddenly, the liver kicked back in and one morning Carmelo woke up lucid. "Where's Michael? I wanna go back to work." But he was too weak. A second infection developed which was traced to his heart. He had to have open-heart surgery to remove the infected tissue.

Michael arrived at the hospital just after Carmelo came out of surgery. The step-mom ran over and said. "He's all right! The doctors say he's going to be all right!" She continued "He's a miracle child. Something is protecting him. You know, one day when he was feeling terrible he told me, "I thank God for what I got. I could be dead. Whatever happened to me is because God told it to happen. There's some kind of message in what I gone through".

Michael went into Carmelo's room. His little clown friend was unconscious but breathing evenly. "Carmelo this is Dr. Stubs. The operation was a big success. You're going to be just fine. All the clowns can hardly wait for you to be back on the job. I'll come again soon. Remember whenever you're ready, we've got a red nose for you."

Carmelo fought hard for his life, but one by one his organs shut down. One day he asked the nurse to bathe him, and dress him in his favorite summer clothes. Then he closed his eyes and was gone.



"He's the hero of the hospital - the bravest of the brave" All eyes are admiration as Carmelo is wheeled into treatment at the hospital by *Dr. Stubs*. "God is my best friend," Carmelo says. *"He stays with me in the operating room."*