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~ Factory of Happiness and Joy

From Joseph Redman

Continuing the philosophy of Patch Adams, a group of Guatemalan volunteers created the Association – Fabrica de Sonrisas, or The Factory of Smiles. On weekends, members of the group visit patients, family members, and older adults in some of the nursing homes in Guatemala City, and they hope to expand their area of influence to other areas.

Andrés Ruiz, President of the Association, says the Factory of Smiles was born in August of the 2007, with a handful of volunteers with an idea to help terminally ill patients in public hospitals to laugh. They also wanted to share laughter and joy with older adults in nursing homes. "What we bring are smiles because it is shown that laughter has therapeutic properties and is a tool to find the sense of the life, as well as a way to one face pain and suffering."

María Olga Stolen, another volunteer, said that the idea to participate in this group is so that patients need not face their illness alone. The humor helps ease the patient's mind, something that is hospital staff is often indifferent to. Ruiz explained, "The Factory of Smiles is quickly growing and now has about two-hundred trained volunteers. All were trained and now qualify to wear a "doctor's" coat, red clown nose, and funny hat.

The association maintains themselves with funds donated by the volunteers and some private organizations and businesses. For now they base their organization in a location loaned to them by a friend. Ruiz said that concept has grown so much they are thinking about a new headquarters, with sections specialized to train more people willing to carry a smile of hope to patients and nursing home residents.

Part of the fund raising activities was a presentation in the national theater to a sold out crowd of two-thousand in

March by Dr. Patch Adams. The funds raised will be shared by the Gesundheit! Institute and by the Factory of Smiles.

The word used by the members of the Fabricas de Sonrisas is "sonrisero", instead of the typical word for clown, "payaso." "Sonrisero" does not have concrete definition in the Spanish language. Even so, any person that is in the presence of a sonrisero can figure out the meaning: a person that uses costumes, gestures, and appropriate props to infect the other person with joy and happiness. Why don't we call them clowns, or payasos? The volunteers of this organization do not charge for their work, and do not consider themselves to be comedians. What unites these volunteers is a desire to share their time so that the indifference of others can be pushed aside and the gap filled with happiness and optimism for children and elders of hospitals and nursing homes in the country. The "payaescuela" or clown school is the place where the volunteers learn to use different skills to help change the day of a sick person. After five months of training, the volunteers graduate and they begin its weekly visits. Its members see it as a true commitment. The graduates of this school are called "doctors of laughter," payamédicos, "doctors of happiness or sonriseros.

Patch Adams in Guatemala



Each one chooses a silly doctor name to carry out his life as a volunteer

At present there are thirty trained Sonriseros Médicos and hopes are that in 2009 more than two-hundred will finish their training.

There are many wonderful videos of the group in action on www.youtube.com Just do a search for Fabrica de Sonrisas.

