

Love in One of its Purest Manifestations ~ Spring Break in Guatemala

Gesundheit Global Outreach (GGO) sponsors Alternative Spring Break Clowning Missions for university students. The GGO has sponsored or been invited on clown trips to Peru, Panama, Italy, China, Mexico, Japan, Cambodia, Russia, and Ecuador. Clown missions require no clowning experience. The work can be strenuous and the extreme settings can be difficult for those who have never experienced extreme poverty or human suffering. Feedback on these missions is overwhelmingly positive, indicating great impact on the individual's personal development and life course. For more info see: www.patchadams.org

My First Time Clowning



From Désirée Ratay, MD from Regensburg, Germany - this is from her website blog. www.desiratay.com

"I have no words. This was magical and it was the most spiritual thing I have ever done with so many people. You CANNOT imagine the effect our love and work had on those who needed it. They teared up even if they were blind or deaf. They felt your touch even though they were paralyzed! . . . I am speechless. This is love in one of its purest manifestations. This is the most beautiful thing I have ever done in my life."



From Joseph Fungus Redman of Satin, Texas

Ah, the joys of the typical spring break – wild parties, excessive drinking, various states of undress, etc. But wait! This was not another typical spring break, but a unique and special alternative spring break coordinated by The Gesundheit! Institute. Invited to Guatemala by members of the *Fabrica de Sonrisas*, The Smile Factory, our troupe consisted of experienced and beginner clowns from the USA, Canada, Brazil, and Germany.

Our plan was to visit hospitals, nursing homes, and a school, all under the expert care of Maria Olga Stolen, a member of the *Fabrica de Sonrisas*. The original plan was to have three groups on spring break adventures at the same time, one in Haiti, one in Nicaragua, and one in Guatemala. Because of last minute difficulties with our local contact on the ground in Haiti, the decision was made to combine the Haiti clowns with those going to Guatemala. John Glick, M.D. led the group to Nicaragua while Patch Adams, M.D. led the group to Guatemala.

Skete and Fungus arrived on Friday the 6th of March, a day early and were met at the airport by members of the *Fabrica de Sonrisas* - Yippee! On Saturday morning Maria Olga picked us up at the Posada Belen Hotel and took us to visit the Saturday morning clown school where we met close to two-hundred volunteer students learning the basics of clowning. What fun!!! We were immediately invited to participate and joined in a variety of improve tasks that had us all laughing and learning. It was a joyful beginning to a most wonderful experience that would come in the days that followed.

As with any humanitarian clown trip there are so many memorable stories to tell. From our expert bus driver to the playful staff at the hotel, Guatemala is a complex and marvelous country for both new and experienced clowns.

Here are a few stories, in no particular order of significance or importance. For Fungus, any opportunity to play and love others is significant and important.

In a large ward in a nursing home for women, we met a smiling woman with multiple birth defects, including tiny deformed hands with small twisted fingers. She was sitting in her bed and appeared to be no more than three or four feet tall. Surrounded by photos of friends and family, she sat wide-eyed as we played and coaxed her into wearing a red foam clown nose. Her eyes sparkled when she looked at herself in the mirror! We heard the familiar call, "Clowns on the bus!" and shared big hugs and kisses with her as we left. I turned to give her a final wave and noticed she was practicing taking her new nose off and putting it back on with her little hands. What a lovely smile!

In another nursing home a staff member was taking me down the hall, when I stopped at a room. She quietly said that the woman in the room was blind. Assuming the resident would not appreciate a clown, the staffer continued to walk down the hall. I entered the room, quietly said, "Hola!" and knelt down so we could share a hug. I said nothing and the gentle blind woman said nothing. We simply held each other and breathed in unison for awhile. Her subtle shift in posture indicated she was finished hugging so I stood up, leaned over, and said, "Te quiero" in her ear. She smiled a great smile and nodded as I left the room. As I made my way down the hall, wondering who she thought I was, and thankful she returned the hug.



In a hospital where children were being treated for cancer, a nurse came and asked Skete and I if we would come with her to the second floor. The area we were in was a little overloaded with clowns so we playfully climbed the stairs and found ourselves in a large waiting room with about twenty people, parents and children, and no clowns!

We noticed an older gentleman washing his hands at the sink that was in the middle of the waiting area. The faucet was automatic, in that there was an electric eye to sense when one's hands were under the faucet. After he finished drying his hands, we cautiously approached the sink and automatic faucet as if it were something to be afraid of. With a look of fear and confusion on our faces we pretended that we had no idea of what to do with this piece of modern technology. We took turns placing our hand in front of the electric eye and then, when the water turned on, backed away quickly as if we were afraid. By now everyone in the waiting room was watching a beginning to smile at the two ignorant clowns.

Suddenly, a little girl of perhaps five or six years of age came over and proceeded to carefully, politely, and with a serious little smile on her face, give us a short lesson oh how to wash our hands. She showed us where the soap was and how to push the pump to dispense the liquid onto our hands. She then demonstrated how to turn on the water and wash our hands. Then she showed us how to pull the lever on the paper towel dispenser so we could dry our hands. Then finally, she demonstrated how to step on the pedal that operated the lid of the trash container! She was amazing and very patient. It was as if she taught silly clowns how to wash their hands every day! My thought at the time was: here we were, in the presence of parents and children going through the various uncomfortable and sometimes painful process of cancer treatment, and this little girl in the process of losing her hair was doing all she could to help us! What a remarkable lesson in love of humanity and patience with everyone!

Across from the Guatemala City dump, where around two-thousand people work recycling and sorting through over a million pounds of trash each day, we visited a day care and elementary school for the children of the dump workers. The facility was started a few years ago by Hanley Denning. Sadly, she was killed in an automobile accident in 2007. I highly recommend

the documentary about the dump titled: Recycled Life ~ From the toxic depths of the largest landfill in Central America comes an inspiring story of the human spirit. The DVD can be purchased from www.recycledlifedoc.com, and is produced by Iwerks-Glad Production Company.

The school is a remarkable facility filled with color, musical instruments, a fully equipped and well stocked kitchen, and a teaching staff that was obviously caring and actively involved in helping the children learn in a safe and clean environment. Before Hanley started the day care and school, the children went with their parents to work and play in the dump. Several were killed each year by the trash trucks flowing in and out of the dump. Now the children learn in an environment of caring professionals each day. Of course Fungus had to disrupt all the classes by leading a trail of children with drums and maracas and other noise-makers as we wound our way through each classroom, ending up in the playground area! What a fun-filled afternoon playing and loving so many happy children. Clowning at it's best!

From hugging a three-month old baby girl who weighed three pounds, to playing with two young girls going through kidney-dialysis, to comforting a crying baby waiting for surgery to repair a cleft-palate, to spending hours on knees playing with "Maria the angel", a nine year old girl in a wheelchair due to severe mental and physical disabilities, the memories of Guatemala now fill our hearts and minds with clown love gone wild! The members of Fabrica de Sonrisas are new friends for life, and we all hope to meet again on another adventure!



Fungus being shown sewing handwork by nursing home resident

Fabrica de Sonrisas ~ Factory of Happiness and Joy

This is a group of youth and adult volunteers in Guatemala with a goal of making a difference in hospital environments through smiles and laughter. They used a variety of tools such as juggling, mime, improv theater, puppetry, acrobatics, face painting, and origami, to provide a happy moment of tranquility and wellness in schools, businesses, hospitals and orphanages.

Continued on next page