How many kids can a clown hug at one time?

“Sooooo many children! Soooooo little time!” John Glick with The Gesundheit! Humanitarian Trips, clowns at a Mercy and Sharing Orphanage in Haiti.

“On our last of six visits, we had an ice cream party. Those who couldn't feed themselves were fed by clowns. It was for most, their first taste of ice cream!”

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**So Many Children with No One to Hug Them**

from Joseph Fungus Redman, Satin, Texas

In early March, Port Au Prince, Haiti was invaded by clowns! A mix of experienced clowns and first-time clowns enjoyed an alternative Spring break adventure in the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Fungus is not good with numbers but he thinks there were sixteen clowns altogether, eight of whom were first-timers.

Under the umbrella of The Gesundheit! Institute and Mercy & Sharing, we loved and played our way into the hearts of orphans, elementary school students, hospital staff, and a beautiful group of children in the Abandoned Baby Unit (ABU) of the Haitian University Hospital.

Mercy & Sharing is based in Aspen, Colorado, and is headed up by Susie Krabacher. Susie's mission is to change the world one child at a time. Mercy & Sharing supports orphanages, schools, feeding programs, a clinic, and the Abandoned Baby Unit. I highly recommend the informative slide show found on their website. (www.haitichildren.org) Susie has written a book titled, *Angels Of A Lower Flight*, which describes her life and story of discovering her passion for the children of Haiti.

Our transportation for the week was a white box truck complete with two bench seats along each side. We had a lovely view through the open back and actively engaged in truck-clowning by waving and performing for everyone we saw on the streets of Port Au Prince. Linda Brunelle was our Mercy & Sharing representative during our visit and she coordinated all our visits and tolerated our last minute schedule changes.

This trip was unique in that we returned to the same locations several times during the week. Normally we try to visit as many places as possible, so this was new and very rewarding to be able to love and play with the same children over and over again!

The orphanage was tucked into a residential neighborhood behind a tall, barbed-wire topped wall, a large metal gate, and a shotgun-armed security guard. When we arrived the central courtyard was teeming with children listening and dancing to music blasting from an old boom box. Within minutes the air was filled with more laughter, screams, giggles, and chaotic noise from clowns and children alike! Children were hanging on clowns, being hugged by clowns, playing soccer with clowns, dancing with clowns, being face-painted with clowns, marching with clowns, and anything else possible that can be done when loving clowns collide with touch-deprived children. Yippee!

The rooms of the orphanage were basically bare of any decoration. The room Fungus went to first contained around twelve children aged from seven months to four to five years old. There were seven sets of bunk beds, and one twin bed for the room “Mom.”

The rails on the beds were only a few inches high and the children on the top beds walked around like caged animals from one end to the other, never once losing their balance. They obviously enjoyed the music as evidenced by their swaying back and forth and bobbing up and down. We enjoyed a lot of dancing!

One little girl, aged eight months, was a little shy but came to Fungus out of what I call red-nose-curiosity. Fungus laid on the Mom’s bed and placed the little girl on his chest so she could have a better view of his nose. She sat for a long time just staring. Finally she cautiously leaned forward and gently touched the red nose. She didn't grab or pull, she simply held onto it with one hand for a moment.

Later during our visit Fungus was captured by a little boy, probably four or five years old, who did not want anything other than to be held. So Fungus sat on the door step and he sat on Fungus, quietly enjoying the hugs. He didn't move for over an hour. Fungus’ heart aches to think about so many children with no one to hug them.

We returned to the orphanage several times which gave us the opportunity to love and play in different areas of the orphanage. In addition to the rooms with healthy children, there were several rooms filled with physically and mentally handicapped children, all needing love, hugs, music, and dancing. There is little more rewarding than dancing with a beautiful young woman who spend her days in a wheelchair, unaware of her surroundings. She loved music, loved wheelchair-dancing, and loved being hugged.

Mercy & Sharing also operates a clinic that sees around 1200 women and children each month. The small waiting areas were instantly transformed into pockets of silliness, music, magic, hugs, chasing, balloons, and of course, red noses! During our second visit to the clinic we were able to do our only street clowning during the trip. Safety and security are serious issues in Haiti so even our little side-trip to the charcoal sorting business next to the clinic was conducted with the presence of the clinic's armed security guard.

The price of any type of petroleum product in Haiti is prohibitive, so most families cook with charcoal. Charcoal comes from trees. Trees come from the surrounding countryside. Haiti has close to 1% (that's right, one percent) of its trees remaining, meaning that within only a few years there will be no source of fuel for cooking for the average family. For now, women at the charcoal sorting business spend their days sorting charcoal by size, all day long. The average wage in Haiti is $0.24/hour, or just under $2.00/ day.
The Abandoned Baby Unit was our favorite stop. We returned there several times to hold, touch, play with, sing to, and be near these children. In Haiti, children born with what is perceived to be a physical or mental illness, or children presumed to have HIV/AIDS or tuberculosis, are often labeled as evil and are abandoned at the doors of the hospital. Fungus latched on to a forty-pound, seven year old boy with microcephaly, a condition where the brain does not grow normally. Even though the child was almost completely unresponsive, Fungus took his atrophied hand and "danced" to the music.

Fungus also played with a little girl in the ABU, and no matter how hard he tried, she would not accept his gift of a finger puppet. He tried, over and over, and each time she returned it gently to his hands. She would laugh and play, but would not keep the puppet. Fungus still has it and if he returns to the ABU, will bring it along again.

Our hotel was guarded by heavily armed United Nations troops from Brazil. They were . . . decorated . . . with multicolored scarves and red noses! Because we were restricted to the hotel property at night, we enjoyed wonderful conversation, singing, and truly getting to know each other as an instant family and miniature community. Long conversations led to deep friendships that will last a lifetime. Each new clown performed magnificently!!! They were one of the most loving, playful, silly, compassionate groups Fungus has ever traveled with, and he anxiously awaits the next opportunity to be with them. (We said, "I love you!", a lot.)

For Fungus, this was one of the most emotionally difficult and rewarding adventures at the same time. There are too many stories to share, but one in particular sticks in Fungus' mind. We were in our truck, had just turned a corner, and Fungus saw what was one of the largest piles of garbage he has ever seen, anywhere. Fungus saw garbage. Andee saw something else and Fungus loves her for reminding him to always look for the positive! The poem below is for Andee.

Andee saw a puppy
while I saw
a garbage mountain heaped
around the corner of two roads
intersecting
buried under used up life
colors fading under tropical sun
bleaching bone dry wrappers
cans
boxes
of imported
barely edible
expired food.

for my soul
emotion clouded eyes
failed to see
life in death
and tears slipped by
taped red nose
onto clown shoes dusted
with orphan kicked soccer ball
playground dirt.

forgetting for
a few moments pity
thinking in my brain
subconscious hearing
interrupted temporary childishness
when Andee said
"look a puppy."

childlike laughter
sanity returned
removing unhappiness
simply because
Andee saw a puppy!

– Joseph Redman

Photographs for the trip can be found at:
http://picasaweb.google.com/HotDamnHoney/HaitiClowns2008Week1
Children are abandoned in hospitals because their parents cannot afford to pay for medicines or medical supplies. This baby, with hydrocephalus, could be helped by a $40 shunt to drain the excess fluid around the brain. A family earns less than $2 a day, and rice costs $1 a day. This baby could not sit, or hold up her head, and she died while we were in Haiti.

**Holding Vicki** . . . . . “As we all held her and kissed her cramped fingers, she began to respond to the medication and to our touch. . .” (Above Susie Krabacher holds Vicki)

**Taylor Branson holding an abandoned child at the hospital**
The hospital had no food, no medicine, no medical supplies, no bedding. All must be provided by the family. Mercy and Sharing brings food, diapers, clothing and medicine for these children. Without Mercy and Sharing, children die of starvation, and neglect. (Taylor holding child on the left)

Caption comments from John Glick (below right)