



Jestfully Caring

In 1986 Karen Ridd, “Robo,” a freelance children’s entertainer, started Canada’s first therapeutic clown program as a staff hospital clown and child life specialist at the Winnipeg Health Sciences Centre. She demonstrated how Robo, a silent but wonderfully expressive clown, could use gentle play and humour to minimize the stresses of hospitalization for children. In this issue of *Healthcare Quarterly*, Nuula, a pink florescent, dancing, space-age clown with a magical green cape gives us a glimpse of the therapeutic clown program at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children that brings laughter, companionship and delight to patients and their families.

 Lucia Cino



Meet the Clowns

Nuula (Lucia Cino) is a pink florescent, dancing, space-age clown with a magical green cape. Wide-eyed and full of delight, she loves to interact with patients and families. Nuula's intention is to serve through play.



Choola (Helen Donnelly) hails from the fictional country of Tubegosh. She is young, eager and is learning English at a dizzying rate. Choola loves to clean and has her own special broom that she carries with her on the 7th floor.



Doko (Kathleen LeRoux) is the colourfully clad clod-hopper of floor 5 (orthopaedics, trauma, neurosurgery) who loves to say "hello." She is typically gently oafish in nature and can be seen shuffling happily between rooms, looking for a new friend to play with.



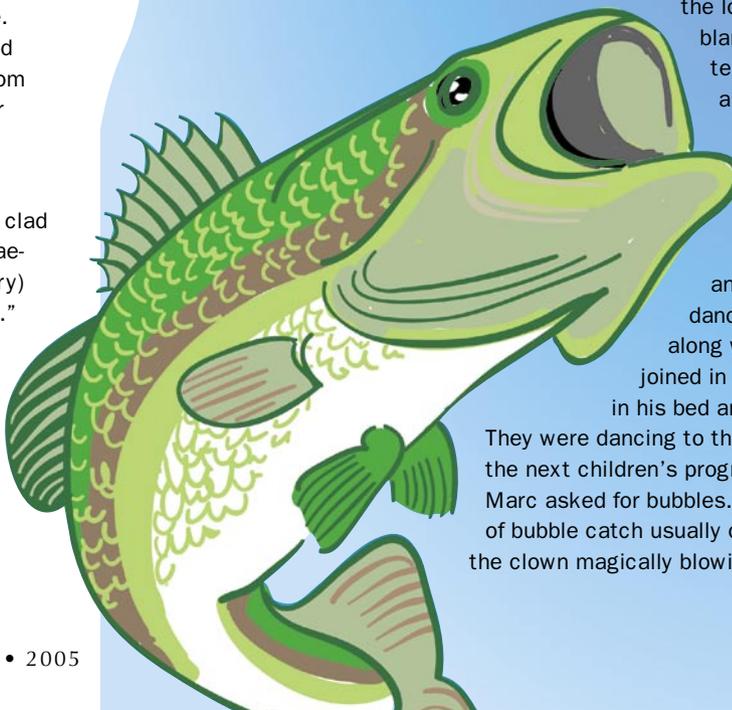
Hello, my name is Lucia Cino. I have worked and played as "Nuula," the therapeutic clown in General Paediatrics, Respiratory Medicine and Infectious Diseases at Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto for four and a half years. I would like to share with you two stories of a particular relationship Nuula enjoyed with a patient who suffers from sickle cell disease. To honour patient confidentiality, the child will be referred to as Marc.

Story #1 – During one admission and at the age of two, Marc had lost his ability to walk and was being re-taught to bear his own weight. He was in his crib when Nuula asked his permission to enter his room so they could play together. Marc said yes. Nuula took out her sparkling wand and drew it across the bars of the bed, turning his crib into a musical instrument. Marc took delight in the noise. His mobility was limited therefore sound became the vehicle of their play. It was through sound that his natural exuberance took flight without containment. Nuula also took out her rattles so he could enjoy making more sounds. The moment Nuula went to her bag to retrieve another toy, Marc stopped rattling. Nuula froze. In that moment of silence, both the child and the clown discovered their game together. When Marc rattled, Nuula began to move and then dance. When he stopped playing, the clown froze in whatever contortion she would find herself. Nuula was well into the dance, when Marc's nurse walked into his room. The clown softly encouraged the nurse to join in which she did, both dancing as Marc shook his rattle and bellowed his sounds. Then his physiotherapist came into the room and for a brief moment, they all danced together to Marc's tune.

Story #2 – During this admission, Marc was three years old and in the special isolation room on the Infectious Diseases unit of the hospital. He and Nuula had become friends and shared a very clear play relationship. When Marc was feeling too sick to play, he would say "no" to Nuula and when he was feeling well, he would say "yes." On this occasion, Marc was very eager to play. When Nuula entered his room,

she was aware of the loud music blaring from the television of a children's program. The clown joined the music and began to dance and sing along with it. Marc joined in by bouncing in his bed and singing.

They were dancing to the music of the next children's program, when Marc asked for bubbles. The game of bubble catch usually consists of the clown magically blowing bubbles



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from the head of a “bubble bear” to a child who with a net in his hand, tries to “catch” the bubbles. At the outset of this game, Marc asked Nuula a very serious question: “What is this hole?” He was referring to the blue base of the clown’s net with a hole in it. Nuula told Marc that a string could be put through the hole or a nail could be hammered to the wall to hang the net. Marc then surprised Nuula again by asking if he could have some string. Fortunately, the clown had some in her bag. She untied the string and gave it to him to put through the hole and then she re-tied it.

Marc then tossed the net over his bed railings as Nuula held the string and the next thing they found themselves doing was fishing in the sea-air below. Marc held the net for control as Nuula tugged at the string line, struggling to catch some fish. The child controlled whether or not the clown would catch any fish and whenever a fish was caught, he would return it to the sea.

How does clown-play help therapeutically?

When I first began therapeutic clowning, I was taught to give children as many choices as possible and to honour their decisions. From the perspective of the child, the hospital may seem like a strange and scary place. He may feel he has no control over his illness and the barrage of staff that may examine him, take blood, do tests and give medication. Nuula certainly does not resemble any of the other medical personnel. She is a colourful. She is also shy, open and willing to play. But first she needs to know what the child wishes and in asking, “Can I come in?” she communicates that his wish will be respected. The child controls whether he wants the clown to enter his room, the kind of play they are to have together as well as its duration.

In the first story, Nuula was aware of Marc’s immobility from her attendance at interdisciplinary rounds. She made the offer of “sound-play” through the wand and the rattle but had Marc refused or showed no interest, another game would have been found. Nuula never seeks to impose play but to offer different play possibilities from which the child may choose. The clown is then able to give back some of the freedom he may feel he has lost. What was particularly delightful about the rattle dance, was Marc’s pleasure in leading not only the clown but also his nurse and physiotherapist who were more than willing to play along.



Mary Sunshine (Cathy Kincaide) loves to play with her young friends on the 8th floor in Haematology, Oncology, Bone Marrow Transplant, Burns, Plastics & Urology.



Bunky (Joan Barrington), born in 1993, loves the colour yellow and walks with a light swagger. Even though he’s 11, Bunky still has difficulty tying his shoelaces, often misplaces his toys, forgets where he is and sometimes goes in and out of the wrong door when leaving a room.



Loo Loo (Heidi Firby) was born on a train and is excited about travelling throughout the hospital clinics to discover new and interesting places and people. She is frequently lost and needs help to find all the special clinics.





Longwoods Publishing in collaboration with the Therapeutic Clown Program at Sick Kids presents the annual **Robo award**. The award recognizes therapeutic clown practitioners for what they really are and for adding colour to the lives of patients (and hospital corridors.)



Clowning is like improvisation that calls upon players to follow the lead given by a single moment. There is a willingness to engage with each other and to trust the back and forth dynamic of play. In the second story, the play was completely directed by Marc. All Nuula was required to do was listen. She asked his permission, listened and responded to the sounds in the room as she and Marc danced together. He asked for bubbles, about the hole at the end of Nuula's net and for string. The clown followed his lead as Marc turned his hospital bed into a ship and himself into a captain, both engaged in creating an unfolding new world.

I believe 'clown-play' may also provide insight into the imaginative world of a child and how he may be processing his experience in the hospital. Marc as captain of the ship in the second story could have caught and kept as many fish as he wanted. Instead he caught and released each one. In another admission when Nuula and he were playing with magnetic benders (colourful, malleable sticks with magnets at each end), Marc would pretend he was a large snake, kill the clown's snake and bring her back to life. There was a period during the course of many admissions that Nuula would often 'die' at the hands of Marc only to have him give back her life.

When I reflected on this game of life and death, I wondered if perhaps that was how Marc experienced his sickle cell disease, a condition that brings excruciating pain. I wondered if in the mind of a two, three and four year old child, Marc thought he was dying with each episode of pain only to be brought back to life by the staff at Sick Kids. Through play, the dynamic of his illness becomes reversed as he takes on the persona of the powerful captain and snake-killer who can bring others back to life. Perhaps this kind of play offered Marc an opportunity to express his experience of his condition in an imaginative way. Perhaps it allowed him to process life/death issues by taking control of what was happening.

There are many opportunities for the clown and patient to get to know each other by building relationships one visit at a time. More often than not, the clown is viewed as a playmate and friend, one who can be trusted to let the child express himself in a play space that is safe. Marc and Nuula have become such friends who together create worlds that bring a sense of fun and freedom to life in the hospital.

To read about the origins of the Sick Kids program, please visit: www.healthcarequarterly.com