

SALUTING THE FRONTLINES SUPPORTED

Send in the clowns

Performing for kids during a pandemic offers unexpected joys

By **Briony Smith** Special to the Star
3 min. read



While medical staff continue to provide care to the children and youth of Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital in East York, Doc Hopper and Nurse Flutter are practising another kind of medicine: laughter. At a time when a little levity is needed more than ever, Holland Bloorview's in-house therapeutic clown practitioners Doc Hopper (a.k.a. Phil Koole) and Nurse Flutter (a.k.a. Suzette Araujo), use music, slapstick and improvisation to boost the mental health of those staying at the hospital, which serves more than 7,500 families each year. Ridiculous fake deliveries cause chuckles in reserved teens, and a ukelele lures even the shyest clients out of their rooms. "It's our hope that through humour, passion and emotional expression, we can connect with each other" says Araujo.

A Cirque du Soleil alum, Araujo has been with the hospital for more than four years; Koole joined a year and a half ago after stints on the stage. Koole was drawn to working in a hospital because, "the clown is the ultimate servant, and I wanted to put that into practice with those most vulnerable and see if the connections I made might alter their outlook on life."

Koole remembers an immense feeling of heaviness in the wards when the pandemic shutdowns began. But once he and Araujo scrubbed in, masked up and started to perform, "we noticed a shift in the mood," says Koole. One of their regulars, a non-verbal teen girl, had been lying in bed, unusually reluctant to join in the fun, when she slowly sat up and started grooving to the music, smiling and clapping.

A parent, face usually contorted in sadness, started to laugh. The staff felt better, too. Later that day, the clowns received e-mails from fellow hospital employees, thanking the clowns for making their day a little more fun. "We knew then that our clown service was going to be essential during these times, and we continue to experience more and more of these moments," Araujo says.

Performing during a pandemic has, however, required a few tweaks to the clowns' normal routines. They can't get up close and personal with the kids, and any interaction has to happen with social distance. "This really affects our play with children that need that physical connection, and has changed the way we approach each interaction," Araujo says. Younger kids can sometimes be playfully impulsive—pre-pandemic, this was fun, but with physical distancing rules, "it requires more attention and direction, which can change the dynamic of the play" explains Koole. The use of personal protective equipment (PPE) is now even more important, adding extra prep time for the comedy duo ahead of their visits. Koole's "very sweet" girlfriend sewed him some masks to wear during his TTC commute, so he could reserve the precious PPE for use inside the hospital.

As for the clowns' own mental health, Koole says that the risk factor associated with simply leaving the house does lead to a heavier day. "Being a therapeutic clown is an emotional job, and the palpable anxiety surrounding COVID-19 adds weight to that, which has affected me." Thankfully the comedy duo works three days a week, leaving some time to rebuild mentally. Araujo's husband also works in essential service, making negotiating care and education for their child more difficult. "As a clown, being present with lightness and joy is essential. And during these perilous times, that has been challenging for both of us."

Still, the show must go on—but it's a little easier when there's two people on the call-sheet. "Thankfully," Araujo says, "we have each other as clown partners." Working as a pair is the best practice in the world of therapeutic clown work. "Working as a duo [allows us] to better support each other and better serve the clients," according to Koole. "During the pandemic, it's been even more imperative as we lean on each other to make it through this difficult time."

Plus, they have another ally they can count on as well: their audience. "They make us laugh during our clown play with them, and that brings our spirits up to help perform better," says Koole.

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