

Circus Ambassador Brings Joy to Young, Old

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By RAY WEISS

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ORMOND BEACH -- Stepping out of his prop-filled van in size 40-something brown shoes, Rik "Bonzo Crunch" Gern straightened his wobbly red hat and adjusted his baggy green pants.

The circus was in town.

Gern, a solo act, travels the country ahead of the entire troupe as an advance clown for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, which has shows scheduled Jan. 26-28 at the Ocean Center.

Inside La Petite Academy, more than 40 preschoolers waited Thursday morning to take in a small piece of the "Greatest Show on Earth."

"I like to start mellow for the sake of the shy kids, and I try to leave it mellow for the sake of the teachers," Gern said with a grin, strumming a ukulele minutes before his show. "The kids are just waking up and miss their moms and dads."

Within minutes, the youngsters were full of energy, giggling and watching Gern -- now in character as Bonzo Crunch -- juggle plastic pizzas, perform magic tricks and act as silly as, well, preschoolers.

Later in the day, he performed for patients in the pediatric unit at Halifax Medical Center in Daytona Beach and for adults at Holly Hill's Bishop's Glen assisted living facility.

"I like the life. It's a wonderful way to see the country," said Gern, 49, the ambassador clown for the circus the last two years. "I get to see people from every age group at their highest, not lowest demeanor. It's a very nice lens on humanity."

Daytona Beach was his last stop of the year and fifth in Florida in the last two weeks, before he headed home to Austin, Texas, after putting more than 40,000 miles on the odometer.

Last New Year's Eve, his van's transmission went out.



Ringling Brothers clown Bonzo Crunch performs at LaPetite Academy Thursday. From left, Kayleigh-Ann Whaley, Denay McLendon and Jonathan Gavin.

Still, Gern enjoys the adventurous life on the road as a single man.

"It wouldn't be conducive to a good home life if I were married," Gern said.

His audience, for now, is his family.



The children watched with clear, focused eyes, enjoying every trick and corny joke.

"Can you put your hand out?" he asked a small volunteer. "She's doing it, even though it's not on fire."

Before leaving, Bonzo Crunch read a children's book about a circus pig named Olivia and urged all the youngsters to turn off their TVs and video games and open more books.

"It's because clowns like to read," he said. "You can learn more about the circus and magic tricks at the library."

A few hours later in Holly Hill, his audience at Bishop's Glen was up to 100 years older.

"You can sit anywhere. I just like to sit on my bottom," Bonzo Crunch told the 15 men and women gathering in the lobby. "Hello and welcome lazy gentlemen."

Charles Dodd, 84, sat in the front row. He last attended the circus as a child growing up in West Virginia.

"I remember Ringling Brothers before they joined Barnum and Bailey," he said out loud. "I remember those days well. I loved them. The circus was always exciting."

The red-nosed, floppy-shoed clown brought back memories for Dodd and the others. Several women smiled as he played classic songs like "It Had to be You" on his harmonica and ukulele.

For Gern, the smiles were as welcome as the giggles earlier in the day.

"The real difference with older people is they don't give you the loud feedback," he said. "It's a very different style of performance. It's more gentle. Less slapstick."

But Bonzo Crunch left both his young and old audiences with a smile and the same words.

"I'll see you the next time I look at you."

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