

Clowning for a Cause

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He's not a doctor or a nurse, but Bonzo Crunch's job is to make kids feel better the only way he knows how.



Bonzo Crunch, a Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey clown, reads "If I Ran the Circus" by Dr. Seuss on Wednesday to Ashley Haga, 10, of Anderson. Ashley was at the Women's and Children's Hospital on the AnMed Health Campus.

(Kendra Waycuilis, Anderson Independent-Mail)

With laughter.

Bonzo, a.k.a. Rik Gern, 48, toddles in his "size 11-teen" shoes into Camp Gonna-Be-Well, the pediatric unit of the AnMed Women's and Children's Hospital. He has one thing on his mind — to bring a little comfort and fun to the little ones.

"I spent time in hospitals as a kid and I remember feeling alienated from everyone and cut off from all the fun other kids were having," says Mr. Gern, an advance clown for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, which is coming to the Civic Center of Anderson in January. "I like to bring a taste of the circus to the children here."

As he makes his way into the unit, he carts an arsenal of smile-inducing items down the hallway in his □personalized "Cadillac" — basically a garbage can on wheels, complete with a front grille, cattle horn and a Texas truck license plate. In it are juggling balls, juggling pizzas, magic props, magic wands, coloring books and more.

As he comes into view, the children's eyes get big.

Latroyie Thompson stares up at him from her racecar wheelchair as he plays his harmonica. He sees her notice him and stops.

"Well, look at you! How old are you?" he asks.

But her shyness takes over and her mother answers for her.

"Wow! That's how old I was when I was her age!" he responds.

The next stop is Ashley Haga's room. When she tells him she's 10, he acts shocked.

"Boy! You're old for your age! And I'll bet you're tall for your height, too!" he says.

It's showtime, with clown noses for everyone. Even the teddy bear gets one.

"Would you like a slow and beautiful song or a fast, dancing song?" he asks.

Deciding on a slow one, he plays his ukulele as though the small hospital room is Carnegie Hall. Ashley's sleepy eyes never leave his face. When he finishes, he sighs.

"That was beautiful. Almost as beautiful as you," he says.

Because his audience is made up of sick children, he's playing to a potentially tough crowd. But that's OK. Sometimes a smile is as good as a laugh in a hospital, he says.

Between visiting hospitals and performing at assemblies, Mr. Gern says he quite possibly entertains hundreds of thousands of children each year.

"I see rich and poor. I see people of different ethnic groups, different cultures and different religions. But I see parents and children. All parents love their children," he says. "It's one of the nicer windows on humanity that you could have."

Before he leaves Ashley's room — he must milk the elephants, he says — he reads a Dr. Seuss favorite and leaves a coloring book for her to enjoy.

His visit hasn't cured any illnesses or healed any broken bones, but perhaps he's made some children forget why they're here, if only for a little while.

It's all in a day's work.

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