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Clown volunteers and smiles of relief

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Traveling along the streets of Hanoi in the closing days of March, locals could witness a group of prancing foreigners dressed as clowns, with musical instruments, balloons and colorful feather dusters, waving to bemused passers-by.

"The creative therapists" were on their way to social centers, orphanages, and hospitals to provide comic relief as therapy to aid recovery and bring laughter to places where comedy is rare.

"Infectious" smiles

The chief of the visiting clowns is Evelyn Citroen, aka 'Clown Bijouxxx,' from the Netherlands-based Clown Bijouxxx Buitenland Foundation. Her aim is to give attention, love, humor and distraction to children and adults in sickness and poverty.

The clowns' slogan is "Not only smile, but kiss also." The letters "xxx" after "Bijou" represent kiss, added Bijouxxx.

After saying that she liked smiles and kisses, she immediately kissed all people standing near her, to "give them joy to smile and feel affection." She said smiles, affection and confidence is a useful "infection" to help each other climb out of sadness and away from illness.

During their two week visit to Vietnam, the group had a busy schedule. Usually, they only had around two hours to relax and travel between places.

They entertained Hanoian adults and children at Phuc Tue, a center for mentally handicapped children; Hoa Binh (Peace) Village for Agent Orange children; and other orphanages and centers, such as Thanh Xuan, Sao Mai, Birla, SOS, and Central Pediatrics Hospital.

Bijouxxx's story

Twenty years ago Evelyn Citroen studied education theory and creative therapy in order to work with children.

Afterward, she worked in a children's psychiatric clinic, meeting children with physical disabilities and other special educational needs.

"I discovered how very important humor is in working in these situations. I also found that humor is a great starting point, especially in making contact with autistic children," she said.

Ten years ago she started to study clowning with four teachers. She did many clown workshops in Holland and an intensive two month long course in Ibiza.

"I learned how to improvise and it is very important for working in unknown situations."

In 1997 she had a revelation when she met the American Patch Adams, well known as the "therapist of smile," at a conference on spirituality in hospitals.

"A desire in me was born, to work as a clown with children in hospitals," Bijouxxx said.

Three years ago she started to work with the charity Rainbow Tree, which gave her a lot of experience in working and playing with sick children in various hospitals in the Netherlands.

In November 2001 she started tumbling with an international parliament of 30 clowns, organized by and with Patch Adams, to visit Moscow and St. Petersburg orphanages and hospitals.

"This was such a wonderful experience that I decided that this will be my work from now on.

"We know the giving of attention, love, humor and distraction stimulates the healing process with sick children. It helps them to forget pain for a while."

This physical contact is very helpful for orphans to feel self respect again, to feel who they really are and "it makes me very happy, that I can help in this healing process by offering and sharing love, attention and humor."

Bijouxxx said clowning is healing.

"Our job is not just to deliver smiles, but sometimes to create smiles from many tears."

Bijouxxx 's group has been to Vietnam before, in 2008.

They have visited other regional countries and provinces, such as China, Tibet, Indonesia and Malaysia.

The Foundation also offers knowledge and skills to social workers, to help them become more aware of children's psychological issues and needs.

For further information about Bijouxxx's work see: <http://clownbijouxxx.nl/>