

Building Bridges of Delight: The Work of Therapeutic Clowns in Long-Term Care

By Kathleen Le Roux, therapeutic clown artist.

What makes for a joyful experience in Long-Term Care? How does someone with severe memory loss, cognitive impairments, profound communication challenges, and a fragile body, play and connect pleasurably with others?

In our field, these are questions that my therapeutic clown partner and I attend to each and every time we visit the elder residents who are our clients.

As professional therapeutic clown artists we specialize in working with elders in Long-Term Care, particularly those with Dementia. Our aim is to lighten hearts and to fortify the spirit by bringing joy, warmth and a sense of connectedness to those in care, on a regular and ongoing basis.

We are not traditional "entertainers." Our work is of a more personal nature. Each visit unfolds completely differently, evolving from the circumstances of the moment, and the needs, interests and abilities of each individual.

For residents who are more difficult to reach or who are more physically and cognitively impaired, our play often begins with stillness.

We may first find a comfortable way to sit with a resident; offering them warmth and love and giving them all the time in the world. We are attentive, open and fully present.

Our stillness is our way of saying hello, allowing the person to see or sense us fully, these two unusual, red-nosed strangers before them. We are tuning in. We attend carefully to every nuanced response, a lifted eyebrow, a change in breathing, a shift in position. And we respond to their response. We enter into a subtle exchange of authentic responses to one another. It becomes a kind of conversation in itself, though words may never be uttered. We are listening and responding, with our bodies and our emotions, following each unfolding moment. This is often the realm where the person with Dementia is at home and at ease; in the moment, without words, expressing themselves in non-verbal ways, alive to nuance and emotion. This is where we can meet...and play.



Photo by Alex Nirta



Therapeutic Clown Artist Kathleen LeRoux at 'Family Councils Connect: Building Bridges' in June 2013

As Hildy gazes at us across the table, she smiles warmly and slowly reaches out her hands towards us. We both reach forward and receive her hands simultaneously. Six hands connect. A moment of surprise – so many hands! Delight illuminates Hildy's smile. We brighten too, sharing in this unexpected moment. She caresses our hands. And we caress hers. So soft and tender. As she moves, we mirror her movements and her intention, following her focus. Tracing lines, embracing thumbs, admiring soft skin. She releases us momentarily. A pause. Then she reaches again. We connect again, warmly. She pulls away again. The two clowns look at their hands, then at each other, questioningly. She reaches forward again. Phew! We breathe in relief. She laughs. This is the beginning.

Kathleen Le Roux has been working as a professional therapeutic clown artist in health care for 12 years. For more information about her work and her services please visit www.kathleenleroux.com