

# She's healing children, one smile at a time!

As anyone with a serious illness knows, your life is forever changed. But what if you were just a child? Where would you find the strength to fight? That's why Cheryl Lekousi is giving kids hope . . . with magic, music and a red nose!

**A** merry heart doeth good like a medicine —Proverbs 17:22. Clowns work like aspirin, only twice as fast —Groucho Marx.

The little boy stood in the doorway of his hospital room, clutching his IV pole as another child might hold a teddy bear.

"Bye," he waved. "I love you!" And Cheryl Lekousi was so moved, she found herself pretending—just one more time—that she was glued to the floor.

"Oh, dear," she mock-frowned as laughter rang out—from visitors, from nurses, but most important, from the boy.

There's nothing funny about a child being sick. Yet Cheryl couldn't help but laugh. Because by being silly, she'd given him—and many other kids in the pediatric ICU—an escape from their pain and fear for just a little while.

Anybody who knew Cheryl knew: Children are her life. The Needham, Massachusetts, mom of two teens even opened a day-care for special-needs kids.

She had such a connection with the kids, in fact, that one of their moms said, "I know something you'd be perfect for!"

It was Hearts and Noses, a clown troupe made up of volunteers who made bedside visits to cheer children with illnesses.

"Thanks," Cheryl said. "But I'm no performer."

Her dad had been, though: He was a magician who'd done shows at the local children's hospital. And suddenly, Cheryl was flooded with memories of kids on stretchers and in wheelchairs who'd looked so sick, so weak. Yet with a wave of his magic wand, he would make a coin or card vanish and when it reappeared, so did the kids' smiles. Every child deserves that

wonder, that happiness, especially if they're sick, Cheryl thought. And suddenly, she wanted to be the one making kids smile.

## The best medicine

First, Cheryl would have to go to clown "camp." And she'd learn from the best: Hearts and Noses' founder Jeannie Lindheim, who'd worked with the clown physician made famous in the 1988 Robin Williams movie *Patch Adams*.

"We can't change a child's diagnosis or prognosis," Jeannie said. "But we can give them hope by making life fun again."

Inspired, Cheryl gathered a polka-dotted dress, too-big Mary Janes and, of course, a shiny red nose . . . and Tic Toc the clown was born!

On her first visit to Newton-Wellesley Hospital, Tic Toc saw two children in wheelchairs, their eyes sad. But when she began singing, they joined in!

Now *this* is the way it should be! Cheryl beamed. And the kids beamed, too. Kids undergoing chemotherapy. Kids who'd been burned. Kids like the seven-year-old who'd lost his sight.

"He's so down," a nurse sighed. "Could you cheer him up?"

He couldn't see card tricks or funny faces, Cheryl thought. So,



"Laughter is good for the body and the soul!" beams Cheryl, above as Tic Toc the clown.

improvising, she asked, "Can I play my harmonica for you?"

No, his angry face said. "How about a song?" she offered, but he shook his head. "Well," she said, "what's your favorite food?"

"Chocolate pudding," a small voice replied.

"I love chocolate pudding!" Tic Toc exclaimed. "In fact, I love to take baths in it!"

And despite himself, he began cracking up!

## The healing power of laughter

"Bless you!" his mom told Cheryl, her eyes shining with tears. And with her son's every giggle, a little of her own worry fell away. Because, finally, someone wasn't treating him only like a patient—but like a regular kid!

And they weren't the only ones transformed.

## 2 ways to make almost anyone smile!

Through clowning, Cheryl has discovered these key ways:

### 1 Talk about something they love.

"Showing a real interest in what someone else loves almost always raises a smile," reveals Cheryl. If you don't know what interests them, just ask!

### 2 Be a great listener.

"It's tempting to try to 'fix things' when someone is down," says Cheryl. "But often, just letting someone talk helps them feel valued and comforted." And that tends to inspire smiles!

**Did you know?** Laughter makes us feel more hopeful—even when we're under very heavy stress!

