



SWITZERLAND



COURTESY THEODORA FOUNDATION

Send IN THE Clowns

Andre Poulie '89 transforms personal tragedy to professional triumph, laying the foundation for clown doctors to help thousands of sick children.

BY BLYTHE BERNHARD



As a child,

Andre Poulie '89 endured a traumatic and lonely hospital stay that inspired his adult passion to comfort kids who find themselves in a similar situation. Today, his Theodora Foundation sends clowns to hospital rooms worldwide—to play, sing, and laugh with thousands of sick or injured children.

As a 10-year-old in Switzerland, Poulie nearly lost his right foot in a lawnmower accident. Months of painful rehabilitation were made worse by dreary hospital conditions.

“There was no attention given to the fact we were children,” Poulie says. “We lived in a hospital designed by adults for adults.”

The only diversion during the hospital stay was Poulie’s mother, Theodora, who made up games and other distractions to humor her bed-ridden son.

Theodora also became a surrogate parent to the four other children in the ward, including one young boy who lost his leg to a landmine and whose parents remained in their war-torn country.

After enduring nearly 10 surgeries and several months of stumbling as he learned to walk again, Poulie left the hospital to return to a world where the air seemed fresher, the clouds fluffier, and the colors brighter.

“It was my climbing of Everest,” Poulie says. “I realized that I would not have made it through if it weren’t thanks to the moral support given me by my mother.”

Poulie thrived in his recovery and later decided to attend college in the U.S. He chose CMC because of its excellent academic reputation and small class sizes. He appreciated the diversity of campus life offered by The Claremont Colleges and the opportunity to live in sunny southern California.

After graduation, Poulie returned to Switzerland. When his mother died, he renewed his determination to help other sick or injured children the way she had helped him. Together with his brother, Jan, Poulie created the Theodora Foundation.

Having kept in touch with the talented surgeon who saved his foot 18 years earlier, Poulie asked her to introduce him to the administration at the University Hospital of Lausanne. With their blessing, he launched the Foundation’s effort to cheer up sick children.

Since 1993, Theodora’s 171 professional clowns have amused three million hospitalized children—plus their friends and families—in Switzerland, England, Turkey, Italy, France, Spain, Belarus, South Africa, Brazil, and Hong Kong.

Poulie credits CMC with teaching him the leadership and problem-solving skills that have led to the Foundation’s international reach.

The College “taught me to listen, observe, and analyze—key ingredients in the decision-making process,” he says. “It helped me to reflect upon very different situations, gave me opportunities to motivate my fellow classmates, and

encouraged me to work in a team and regularly take the lead and carry the weight of a decision.”

The Theodora Foundation operates on an \$8 million budget with 32 full-time employees. Dozens of clowns work part-time and entertain about 30 kids on each visit, totaling 300,000 hospitalized children a year.

“What amazes me most is that children, wherever they are in the world, are the same,” Poulie says. “They are courageous and generous. They worry more about the sorrow they inflict on their parents than for their own sake.”

Poulie understands that all kids need to laugh, play, and have fun. He hopes Theodora’s clowns offer them a chance to forget their circumstances.

The clown doctors, with whimsical names like Dr. Ding Dong, Dr. Rodeo, and Dr. Loo Loo, wear highly decorated, personalized doctors’ coats and carry colorful plastic stethoscopes and thermometers to reduce fears in a serious setting.

The clowns perform magic tricks and use imagination to create a fantasy world where hospital walls evaporate and wizards, fairies, and dreams can live.

Together, the children and clowns sing, joke, and laugh. Research has shown that laughter can ease stress, relax the body, and even boost the immune system.

Most of the clowns have prior training in theatrical fields. To become a hospital clown, they receive an additional year of training in magic, acting, and juggling as well as infection control, medical terminology, and grief counseling.

The Foundation’s next project will be to expand their programs to include children with developmental disabilities. For the past decade, in Switzerland, the clowns already have been visiting children with autism.

Another goal for future clown visits involves children struggling with eating disorders and obesity. Clowns will teach lessons on exercise and healthy eating in a fun environment.

It’s all for the kids facing grown-up problems.

“Their brave attitude teaches us modesty,” Poulie says. “The large smiles illuminating their faces, their laughter echoing in the wards, give us all at Theodora the desire to continue.”

For more information, visit www.theodora.org

