

## **Celebrating 25 Years of Therapeutic Clowning and Clown Doctoring in Canada and the United States**

Twenty-five years ago, in 1986, two pioneering Hospital Clown Programs in pediatric facilities, were seeded. Miles away from each other, in two countries and unbeknownst to each other, Renée Ethans and Karen Ridd (Robo the Clown) of the Child Life Department at Children's Hospital, Winnipeg Health Sciences Centre, Canada, and Michael Christensen (Dr. Stubs) of the Big Apple Circus Clown Care program, New York City, United States laid the foundation. Their vision, inspiration and commitment have since spawned Clown Programs in hospitals and healthcare facilities across Canada, United States and around the world.



Twenty-five years later, in November of 2011, the Canadian Association of Therapeutic Clowns/L' Association Canadienne Des Clowns Therapeutiques (CATC/ACCT), held their 7th Annual CATC/ACCT Conference, "Celebrating 25 Years of Therapeutic Clowning and Clown Doctoring", at which Michael, Karen and Renée were honoured. This historical milestone marked the first time they met!

Therapeutic Clowns, Clown Doctors, family and friends from coast to coast enjoyed an intimate evening filled with the music of Canadian icon Fred Penner and Mark Seburn. CATC / ACCT President Fif Fernandes, of the Alberta Children's Hospital and Vice President, Cleve Sauer of IWK Hospital in Halifax presented a retrospective honouring the fool, jester, shaman and clown who

played a crucial role in eastern and western cultures throughout history. They also honoured Hippocrates (470 BC – 350 BC) the father of western medicine whose constant troupe of clowns and musicians in his hospitals enhanced healing. This was the perfect springboard to introducing the work of our honoured guests.

In 1986, Karen, a social activist, noted the positive and empowering impact her mime clown Robo had with inner city children. Having asked herself, “Where are children marginalized and in great need of a clown?” she approached Ruth Kettner, Manager of the Child Life Department at Children’s Hospital, Winnipeg Health Sciences Centre with her idea of using altruistic clowning to serve and support children in hospital. Dressed in clown costume, neon blue hair and mime white face, Ruth was totally smitten with Robo and sent her off to see Renée Ethans.

Renée, a forward thinker and visionary who was in charge of the in-house TV station could not have agreed more; and Robo, the bumbling fool who delighted children, their families and medical staff, was hired. Karen was the first known paid therapeutic clown to be a member of a health care team at a Canadian Hospital, and the program she initiated in Winnipeg in 1986 continues to this day.

Simultaneously, in New York City, co-founder and Creative Director of the Big Apple Circus, Michael Christensen was grieving the loss of his beloved older brother Kenneth to pancreatic cancer the previous year. On his knees and in utter despair, Michael made a commitment to serve. Within two weeks the phone rang, and Virginia Keim, Chief Officer of Development, requested he perform as his character Mr. Stubs at an event called Heart Day. This was an annual celebration for children who had undergone cardiac surgery at Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital of New York Presbyterian.

Before his death, Kenneth gave Michael an old medical bag, purchased at a second-hand shop. Now, donning a white lab coat, medical bag in hand, Mr. Stubs made his first appearance as Dr. Stubs. Deadpan, he addressed the audience, “From now on you can eat whatever you want as long as it is part of the four major food groups: pizza, popcorn, chocolate, and beer.” The room, packed with medical professionals, donors, families and children who had survived heart surgery, erupted in laughter. Michael was asked to explore the potential of clowns on regular rounds in hospitals, and the Clown Care Unit (CCU) was born. Twins by different Mothers!

Each of the honourees was presented with original artwork, depicting a special moment in their early years.

David Langdon, Clown/Child Life Specialist at the Winnipeg Health Sciences Centre since 1989, who uses two distinct clown personae based on both Karen and Michael's work, honoured Renee Ethans with a portrait based on a charming scene in the 1987 video "Robo in the Hospital". The picture symbolized Renee's part in bringing Karen's vision to fruition and her supervising the program over the past 25 years.



Renee states, "Because we were previously using puppetry and closed circuit TV as child life tools, we already recognized the therapeutic value of humour and play. We were totally primed and open when Karen came to us with the idea of using clowning in a pediatric hospital setting."

It was through a prophetic dream of being a clown in the 80's and then discovering Karen through an interview on the news in the early 90's, Joan Barrington's dream came to fruition. By 1993, Joan fundraised and founded The Therapeutic Clown Program at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children. In 1999, along with Mary Hirst, she founded Therapeutic Clowns Canada (TCC), a nonprofit foundation, created to help bring therapeutic clowning to all major pediatric facilities across Canada through the provision of seed funding and the training of therapeutic clown practitioners. What originated with the birth of Robo and the Robo Project continues with solo therapeutic clown models in programs coast to coast.

Joan presented Karen with a commissioned portrait of Robo with her invisible dog from her early years.



Touched by the evening, Karen states, “I often feel very grateful that; while I have the personality of an initiator I don’t have a great sustainer personality. I feel so blessed that I was able to initiate and David took over and then initiate and Joan took over. I am so grateful for all of you that have carried this work for so long. What an incredible honour it has been to have a chance to do what I have loved to do. My dad, my late father, used to say “Find what you love to do and play. Do it with play and joy.” And that is what we get to do, what we are called to do and what we have the honour of doing. Thank you for letting me be part of that journey.”

A pivotal moment for Paul Hooson, a professional clown and puppeteer from Vancouver, was the 1990 Life Magazine featuring the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit, and a photo of Dr. Stubs and Carmelo, a child patient with amazing spunk, who joined Dr. Stubs and the Clown Care Unit on rounds. Paul was inspired to found the Doc Willikers Therapeutic Clown Doctor Program in early 1994 as a solo clown doctor, the first of its kind in Canada. He was generously mentored by Michael and the CCU. The photo was seen globally, and from around the world came numerous requests to mentor with Michael, and Clown Doctor Programs mushroomed.

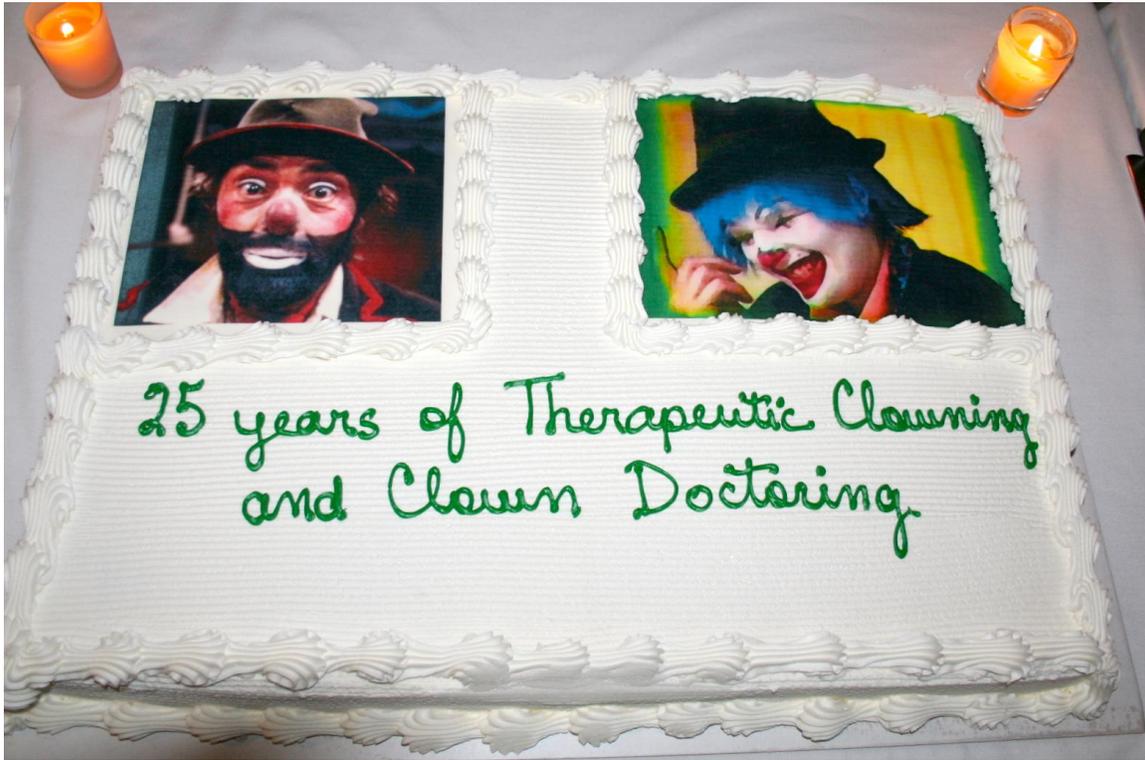
Paul presented Michael with a commissioned pastel of the 1990 Life Magazine photo that changed millions of lives for the better.



During his keynote, Michael applied make-up, glued on his clown nose, donned a hat and seamlessly transformed into Dr. Stubs. He then proceeded to weave heartfelt stories together with demonstrations of medical parody, including the proper use of a heart accelerator, a bone adjustment and a highlight of the evening - Dr. Stubs performing a red nose transplant on Karen.



After relating the story of Big Apple Circus **Clown Care**<sup>SM</sup> and the many programs it has inspired across Europe and South America, Michael concluded, "So Karen, Renée ...It is just totally, completely, utterly and wonderfully out of our hands. It was never really in our hands. It was something that passed through us, continues to pass through us. It was always bigger than us and we are all grateful to be a part of it. It is a story with a happy beginning, a happy middle and no end in sight!"



The evening ended on a sweet note, with the cutting of a custom made cake depicting Dr. Stubs and Robo in action. May the next 25 wonderful years be as exciting and rewarding as the first.

*Original portraits of Robo and Dr, Stubs were created by Karen E. Gersch (<http://artbykeg.info/>), who is also a Clown Doctor with the Big Apple Circus **Clown Care**<sup>SM</sup>.*

*Photos by Hamish Boyd and Ruth Cull*