

Best Clowning Around...with Lev Leytzan

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Medical Clowning: A Serious Profession

They stroll around the children's ward, people of all sizes in colorful outfits and big red noses, waving pretty balloons and warm smiles on funny faces.

But the goal is a serious one. Medical clowning, as it is called, has become a real profession, albeit a part-time one for most of its team members.

One of the most active groups in the New York area is Lev Leytzan ("Heart of the Clown in Hebrew), the brainchild of Dr. Neal Goldberg, a clinical psychologist with a busy private practice in the Five Towns.

The project itself came as the result of his authoring a book for teens and parents on grieving together with Miriam Lieberman, entitled "Saying Goodbye."

The book focused on death, mourning and finding meaning after the death of a loved one and surprisingly, he said it gave birth to a new project in the process.

"It really made me think about how to make meaning during one's lifetime," he says, "especially during adolescence when kids are developing."

That was where Lev Leytzan popped up.

"Lev Leytzan was born out of a desire to affirm life and celebrate the blessings we have with us now - while we are alive!" he

explains. "Youth need to give of themselves. Young adults share the common thread of wanting to have a spark lit, or wanting to be ignited," he adds. "They need a means with which to use their gifts; only then can they actively sustain life and connect with the community."

Such a goal, says Goldberg, cannot be accomplished independently, nor through "self-absorption or self-indulgence," but rather by sharing one's gifts with others. "Hence, the beauty and

power of clowning!" he says.

Studies in psychodrama, learning about the important role of humor and human interaction in medicine through the story of Dr. Patch Adams (whose life was depicted in the movie "Patch Adams") and works by Dr. Normal Cousins, who emphasizes the healing power of humor in treating illness, all combined to bring forth Lev Leytzan.

"We take clowning very seriously," says Goldberg on a more sober note. "Not to mention others who have tinkered with the idea, we are very focused on the art and science of clowning, and both the impact on the clowns as well as those they clown with, and for."

Goldberg's team includes older teens as well as young adults, all of whom go through a rigorous training program prior to their debut. "We train kids about illness and try to prepare them for what they will see. For the kids who are most squeamish, we scout out rooms for the sights and smells that would disturb them.

"For example, burns and amputations disturb a number of our kids, so we try to capture this before they go in. Also, we do a lot of debriefing, a lot of talking, remembering and crying! It goes a long way," he noted.

Goldberg also runs a program called the "Clowns for Safety Squad" that uses clowning and circus to teach kids and families about fire safety. "We've performed over the past three years for more than 30,000 kids and families," he said. "This program is very near and dear to me."

Lev Leytzan was recently in Israel, performing for children in Jerusalem's Hadassah Hospital and elsewhere around the country. "We love Israel," says Goldberg. "We'll be back!"

