by Lincoln "OPPEE" Richards
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After passing half of my first official calendar year as a clown, I would like to share a few thoughts with other novice joeys.

I joined the Masons to become a better man, and to meet men who did the same. I joined the Shriners to help the Shriner's Burns Institute. I joined the Clown Unit to make the children smile and laugh. I had already seen the world.

The biggest thing for me to overcome to be a clown was to put on makeup for the first time. Remember? Makeup after all was not macho, and I really had a mental block on that one. I owe it to Tony "U-No" Mucci for busting down that barrier. He invited me over to his house,and before I could open my mouth, he gave me my first clown face. I had crossed the barrier between normal and fantasy.

Early on I knew that a trip to the Shriner's Burns Institute in Boston as a clown was a necessity. Notwithstanding the descriptions given me of the patient's appearances, I felt I would see the children as the kids they were... that, after, was why I wanted to be a Shrine Clown in the first place. The trip was great. The patients and parents were outstanding and the staff was unbelievable. As it turned out, my biggest problem was keeping the curious kids from cleaning my clown props out of my pockets. Kids are what clowning is really about. Never mind how old or what shape the body might be in... either from age or suffering... a kid is a kid.

Ever hold out you arms to a baby beginning to walk? One does not expect little feet to do double time... just one step. Clowning has been the same for me, one step at a time. Picking up a piece, spending a few minutes with it every now and then, and soon the puzzle comes together forming a picture. Concentrating on one piece until satisfied works very well for me. It does not have to be perfect, only rewarding. The kids will make it perfect in their eyes.

I remember the day someone handed me a bag full of Shrine balloons. I could not blow them up. Talk about red face and frustration. I decided blowing was slowing down my learning so I got a hand balloon pump. Tried two before I decided they were no help -- never worked. Got a rechargeable battery operated pump, a good one... my best clown investment. I can do the balloon basics now, even know about Easy Blow Balloons, but have been watching the old timers with their balloon artistry. That will have to get some attention soon. There is satisfaction in handing someone a twisted balloon.

I learned to do minor juggling -- never thought I would. Kept counting the number of times I could throw a set of bean bags in the air, and eventually they were in the air long enough that I stopped counting. I thought the kids would appreciate that -- they didn't. I could see I was boring them. So now occasionally I drop them on purpose. They love it. It no longer embarasses me.

A few months after the first of the year, since I was too stupid to know what was meant by "competition," I figured I had better find out. I went to the classes put on by the NESCA Institute in Salem, NH. They made it seem simple and like a lot of fun. They gave out plenty of pointers, a stack of papers with hints, and a beautiful graduation pin and diploma. I decided thus armed I would "compete" while I was still too dumb to know better. I built a stilt box, tried it in a few parades, figured, "What the heck!", filled the car with junk, a couple of bags, and the wife, and headed down to Hartford, Connecticut for a long weekend. We had a super time. Met wonderful people. I competed in Auguste face and as a one man skit. I recommend it highly to any joey, new or old. Go and enjoy it... do not worry if you will "score." There is plenty of appreciation and satisfaction to go around.

As a new clown, I have attended parades, been to conventions, parties, fund raisers, the circus, TV, Boston Common, seminars, clown college, and the hospital. One woman rushed out of a parade crowd and thanked ME for the work the Shrine Hospital did in rebuilding their daughter's disfigured body. You need not ask why I clown, the answers are there for those who have eyes to see. A buck here, a buck there. One hundred dollars here and one hundred dollars there, all going for the hospital. Once as we left a clown gig with a check donation for several hundred dollars for the Sneaker Fund, one of the Aleppo Clowns put it this way very well:

"...after all, that's what it's all about."

Masonry needs more Masons, Charities need more Masonic Donations, and the world needs more good clowns. Dedication comes from attention, and attention thrives on small details. If you are both a Mason and a Shrine Clown, walk and act as such... if you are a new clown, fear no danger. Clowns make good conductors. With the help of many of them I expect to make it to the end of my first year.