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Juggling Helps in Rehab

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WEST BOYLSTON— Most weekends, Larry Rettig can be found juggling, twisting balloons into 10-gallon-hat sculptures and pulling coins magically from behind children's ears.

As Flippo the Jugglin' Clown, Mr. Rettig, 52, is a seasoned entertainer who can mesmerize a room as he juggles an egg, a plunger and a bowling ball all at once. But behind the orange wig, red nose, and baggy blue-sparkle pants, Mr. Rettig has also found a way to apply his have-fun philosophy to a more sober part of his life: his work as a drug and alcohol rehabilitation counselor.



Flippo

One day a week, Mr. Rettig sheds his clown clothes and puts on the title of crisis intervention counselor at AdCare Hospital in Worcester. The lessons he teaches are part of an 11-day journey to sobriety, from detoxification through psychological rehabilitation. In his classroom, he helps rehabilitating patients experience the physical and mental benefits that juggling and balloon sculpturing can provide.

To help patients rebuild their lives, Mr. Rettig first hosts a one-hour self-help seminar, holding a symbolic mirror to patients' faces and asking them what kind of future they want to embrace. Afterward, the juggling balls and balloon tricks come out. An optional one-hour session, for those who stick around for it, is an opportunity to redirect their minds from personal troubles, drugs and drink to the joys of clowning.

“A lot of our patients struggle over how to have fun without substances, and the juggling and his personality teach people how to have fun,” said Sue Hillis, the hospital's treatment director. “It is the number one way to relieve stress,” Mr. Rettig said.

There also appears to be some medical research to back this up. A 2004 study published in the journal *Nature* claims that learning how to juggle may increase the brain's gray matter. A German study followed two groups of people for three months,

one that juggled and one that did not. At the end, a series of MRI pictures revealed that the part of the brain that controls eye and hand coordination was “beefier” in the juggling group.

But Mr. Rettig doesn’t need a study to teach him what he already knows. Warm and gregarious, he is always on, talking fast and loud, grinning ear to ear, and gesturing perpetually with his hands and arms — a trait he picked up while learning his clown trade. His finished basement in West Boylston is his studio, crammed with juggling machetes, magic tricks, an electric piano, clown portraits and stuffed clown dolls given to him over the years.

He can be easily spotted around town driving his clown car — a boxy black Scion with large, attention-seeking colorful decals on the windows and sides that say “Here comes Flippo” on the front and “There goes Flippo” on the back.

On the weekend, he wears his clown makeup sometimes for 12 hours, when he has two or more shows in a day. It takes an hour to put it on and it is a lot of work to take it off. “Some clowns will go about with their regular life in between shows,” he said. “Not me. You won’t catch me shopping at Marshalls in makeup.”

Mr. Rettig decided to become a part-time counselor because he has seen his father and some close friends struggle with addiction. His parent’s divorced when he was 2 and his father, Heinz, moved to Las Vegas to become a local TV talk show host. After settling down, his father married a woman who became a talent manager for Joan Rivers and Liberace, among other stalwarts of the old-school Vegas Strip days.

Mr. Rettig admits that show biz is in his blood. He started his clown career when a successful Jaguar salesman spotted him juggling on the street and asked him to teach him juggling. A friendship began and they formed a two-man show, which later became just Mr. Rettig. Nineteen years ago, he placed an ad in the Yellow Pages as Flippo the Jugglin’ Clown, got a good response and a new career was born.

A year into the counseling job, he got the courage to present his idea to the hospital that juggling is a great self-esteem builder for rehab patients. He met with the AdCare management and made his pitch. While juggling long swords reminiscent of the Arabian Nights, he explained the benefits of teaching juggling to addicts. Then, as his finale, he thrust out one of the swords and said, “We might as well take a stab at it.”

The committee was intrigued and said yes — to juggling balls and making balloon sculptures, but not to swords. At AdCare, Ms. Hillis, who also holds a master’s degree in social work, is convinced that the juggling therapy helps some patients. “It’s an activity that requires a significant amount of focus,” she said. “It helps patients

distract from other difficult situations in their lives.” She added, “You can always tell the day after (Larry) does group, because there are balloon animals in everyone’s room.”

Mr. Rettig said his counseling job can be stressful. Once a month or so, he is summoned to help manage a Code Green: a patient who is under so much stress he or she behaves uncontrollably, often screaming at everyone in sight. Mr. Rettig said he enters the room as the patient is at full boil and pulls out a yellow hankie from his pocket. “Watch carefully,” he says softly to the patient as he stuffs the hankie into his left fist. He blows on it, then slowly opens his hand to show it has magically disappeared. “I know it looks like it disappeared, but it didn’t,” he says with a big grin as he opens his right hand to show the hankie. Five minutes later, the crisis has passed.