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# Essence of clowning creates happiness

BY SHERRY KAHAN

Lyle K. Nemeth of Garden City did something as a child that many children dream about doing. At 13, he ran away from home and joined a circus.

Today, although he makes his living driving a truck and looking after his vending machines, the stamp of the big top is still on him. He spends his spare hours performing as a clown and as Therman the Magician.

"The essence of being a clown is to create happiness," said Nemeth, who believes the worst punishment in the world for him would be to put him in solitary confinement away from people.

"Different people react in different ways to humor," he says. "I can laugh at anything. For others you have to work to find something that will hit their funny bone."

Nemeth evidently had good luck hitting this particular note because he is asked to many "clowns" given by such local organizations as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, AMVETS and Knights of Columbus.

HE ALSO WON recognition as best comic at the Southwest Detroit Free Press Festival in 1966, 1967, 1968 and 1972. In addition, he is a past president of Clowns of America, an organization devoted to training clowns.

"During the Freedom Festival parade, the judges give clowns a score

as they pass in review," says Nemeth. "They also have spotters along the parade route watching what we do."

At these events, Nemeth does balloon sculpture, forming animals out of colored balloons as he walks along.

"When there is a pause I pull out and perform the pocket tricks I carry with me," he said. "Milky the Clown taught me magic tricks. I also do gospel magic, which are magic tricks with a religious message."

Nemeth is what is known in the trade as a white-faced clown. "It takes me about a half hour to make up if I have to hurry," he explains. "It only takes 10 minutes to take it off. I use a solvent to dissolve it, then I just wipe it off."

He adds: "It is a grease type makeup. I could be hit in the face with water from a hose and it wouldn't bother me one bit at all."

While speaking he opens his makeup kit only to find that the large red stick he uses for reddening his lips, cheeks and nose has disappeared.

"I'll bet my son borrowed it," says Nemeth, adding that his son, Lyle Edgar Nemeth, started at the age of 12 to follow in the large, clownlike footsteps of his father. Now in his 20s, he still puts on a white face to join his father in local parades.

"Clowning came my way and I accepted it," said Nemeth, recalling his younger days in the circus. Born in Detroit, he spent his youth with Barkers Brothers and Dodge Brothers circuses.

"We traveled all over the country," he recalls. "I helped pitch the tents because we had to move every day."

Nemeth continues: "My first job in the ring was to bring out the little dogs, monkeys and Alaskan huskies. A little later they let me perform with the animals. I would put them through their routines, jumping through hoops and dancing."

"Then I went into a clown skit called Jargo the Giraffe. I played the front half of Jargo."

Nemeth also revealed how these human animals make their way through their oftentimes complicated routines under the big top.

As the front legs, Nemeth, bent over somewhat, held the neck and peeked through a hole in the giraffe's chest.

"The man behind had his hands on my hips and could easily follow my footsteps," Nemeth says. "We never fell over each other even though he couldn't see. It also helped that we did the same frequently."

CIRCUS BUFFS will be interested in a routine that was popular in the 1930s.

"A man would rush up to the ring master and beg for a chance for Jargo the Giraffe to perform," says Nemeth. "He would explain how gentle the giraffe was. Then when the giraffe was given his chance, we would come in charging and chase the ringmaster around the ring. Every

time he would give us we would go off."

"Finally the ringmaster would trip and the back half of the giraffe would sit on him."

While working as Jargo, Nemeth was learning his craft as a clown in parades and sometimes in the ring. But his ambition in life was simple.

"I was ambitious to get something in my stomach," he laughs. "You see while I like clown work, the circus business was awful hard. If the work hadn't been so hard I could have enjoyed it more."

Little boys and girls who dream of becoming dazzling circus performers do not realize that in Nemeth's time, it was by no means all glamour.

"Circus life was hard because after the show, everyone, including the performers, had to tear down the tents, load them and move on to the next location."

"The next stop was anywhere from five to 100 miles away," he adds. "When we got there we had to set up the tents again and then we could go to bed."

EVEN TODAY clown work is strenuous according to Nemeth. "You can figure that in those parades if the march is a mile and a half long, a clown will walk three to four miles."

"I like the people who come to watch. I like everything about people and I enjoy their laughter very much."

Nemeth has his own private list of

priorities as to the people he approaches with his balloons and tricks during parades.

"My first choice of someone to go up to is a mentally disturbed kind of person," he notes. "Then I look for people in wheelchairs, or very old people or cripples. After that I go up to little girls and boys."

"You make each person feel they are the most important person in the world and that makes them happy."

This, he finds, can be quite a challenge during the company picnics at which he works. "I will work only six hours at these jobs. But I try to single out as many as possible for special comments but sometimes there are from 200-300 kids there."

He entertains the adults as much as the children, saying, "Often they have a better time than the kids but they don't want to admit it."

When Nemeth retires from truck driving in a little over three years he plans to devote his full attention to clowning. He is even going to add ventriloquism to his act, having already acquired a dummy as yet unnamed.

He is optimistic about the clowning profession.

"Clowning is getting stronger," he claims. "It was low a few years ago but is making a strong comeback. The quality of clowning is becoming better."

"The quality dropped a while back because clowns did not have much training. We were getting a lot of lip-

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