

BEHIND THE FACE PAINT

By Lori Hatcher

Dee Dee Parker loves clowning around. Literally. Unlike other pastors and missionaries who put on their Sunday best to address their congregations, Dee Dee's outfit of choice often includes a curly wig, size-15 shoes, and white face paint. She is a Christian clown.

Dee Dee didn't grow up wanting to be a clown. Married to a Southern Baptist youth and music minister, she was content behind the scenes, helping her husband, Jim. She remembers brainstorming with him about a youth ministry trip to Myrtle Beach in which they'd visit all the campgrounds and invite people to attend vacation Bible school. While figuring out the best way to promote the school, Jim proposed an idea. "We'll have a parade! We'll go through the campgrounds with balloons and music and, I know, we can have a clown lead the parade and give out the invitations!"

Dee Dee responded enthusiastically, "Honey, that's a great idea! Who will be the clown?"

"Well," he paused, "you!"

The rest, she says with a shake of her head, was all "a God thing." Less than excited about the prospect of being a clown, she told Jim she would consider it "if I can find a way to get some training." But secretly she was thinking, "What are the chances of that in this small town?"

She chuckles. "Never underestimate God," she says. "That very week, in our local newspaper, I saw an ad that asked, 'Have you ever wanted to be a clown?'" Pinky's Gospel Clown School, based in Greenville, was coming to Laurens. "I went to the clown training and I thought, 'OK, Lord, I guess I'll be leading a parade through the campgrounds of Myrtle Beach.' And I fell in love with it."

Asking Dee Dee to describe her favorite clowning venue is like asking her to name her favorite flavor of ice cream. "I love them all," she says. Dee Dee, 63, as her clown character "Deedles" has ministered in hospitals, nursing homes, children's conferences, churches, and on television. When Jim retired from full-time ministry, they

returned to family land in Waynesville, N.C., which is now her home base.

As a staff member at the now-closed Pinky's Gospel Clown School, Dee Dee helped train missionaries in the art of clowning. "They can go into countries as professional clowns when they aren't allowed in any other way," she explains. Along with classes on makeup, costumes, and props, clown missionaries learn to share the gospel through such cross-cultural methods as the Wordless Book, an evangelist tool that uses colors, not words, to represent the different aspects of the salvation story.

"I want to use Deedles as a vehicle, however God chooses, to present the gospel," she says. "That, in addition to my commitment to care for the sick and the aged, is my gift to God." Part of her costume is a tiny heart on the tip of her nose. "I wear that every day to remind myself to have a heart for lost souls."

She often shares her faith with children at vacation Bible schools, birthday parties, and fairs. But she's quick to point out that "a clown

can present the gospel, but a clown cannot lead a child to Christ. You turn it over to a pastor, because we (the clowns) are fictional characters. We would not want to confuse them."

She attributes her soft spot for children to her rich spiritual upbringing. The only child of older parents, she describes herself as "love spoiled." She came to Christ early, and feels sorry for those who do not know Him.

With light brown hair and green eyes, Dee Dee looks nothing like Deedles, who's much more colorful. In clowning terms, Deedles is a white-faced clown. She wears lots of petticoats, purple shoes, and cute accessories. "I think Deedles is much prettier than I am," she confides. Deedles is a sweet clown with a softer personality than some of the more boisterous, practical-joke-playing clowns with whom she ministers.

One of her favorite stories involves her nursing home ministry. While presenting a program of Scripture reading, music, and refreshments, she noticed a young wheelchair-bound woman the nurses didn't include in the group. She learned the patient had had



Dee Dee Parker is Deedles, on right.



Dee Dee Parker, above, ministers in nursing homes, top left. Her daughter Brooke, right, who succumbed to cancer, was a focus of Parker's ministry.



to book signings dressed in overalls and pigtails like the Josie Jo character in the book. Their mothers also came to hear Brooke's story and the book's motivation.

"Tears would fall off their faces ... they were crying for Brooke, crying for me, and crying for themselves," Dee Dee says. "They would ask, 'How could this happen?' and 'Could this happen to me?'"

Brooke passed away at age 34, but her work lives on through Josie Jo, Dee Dee Parker, and Deedles. "My clown character is known as a joy-bringer," Dee Dee says, smiling. "I know that (in Brooke) I have a precious deposit in heaven. I am blessed. My mission is to help bring Christ's joy into the world, and I'd like to challenge everyone to find their passion and use it for kingdom work. There's work to be done at any age. Brooke accomplished a lot in her shortened lifetime, and I hope to do the same in mine." ROC

For more information on *Josie Jo's Got to Know*, visit www.josiejo.com.



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several strokes, and in her two years there, had never responded to a program. Usually she just stared into space. Emmie was 31 years old.

"Would you please just roll her over to where I am so I can at least try?" Dee Dee asked. Skeptical, the nurse gave permission to bring the woman into the circle. "I noticed that though Emmie didn't say anything, she kept looking at my shoes. They were beautiful size-15 purple shoes that had a ring of hearts around the toes. I took off my shoe and asked her if she would like to try it on. She didn't say anything, but she kind of smiled. I took her slipper off and put my shoe on, and she laughed! Every month from then on, I would bring an extra pair of shoes for Emmie to wear."

Clowning isn't Dee Dee's only talent. A watercolor artist who designs her own Christmas cards, she also enjoys writing for adults and children. She recently signed a contract for a series of articles for Focus on the Family's *Clubhouse Jr.* Magazine. Her most significant work is a children's book, *Josie Jo's Got to Know*. A lighthearted story with a weighty purpose, the book centers on a freckle-faced redheaded girl who loves to ask questions. The self-published book has been enthusiastically received by children around the world. There are copies in Japan, South Africa, and England, where Dee Dee donated two boxes of books to an orphanage. A copy of *Josie Jo's Got to Know* even travels by camel in an African bookmobile.

More significant than *Josie Jo's* reach is its purpose. The year before Dee Dee wrote the book, her daughter Brooke was diagnosed with end-stage breast cancer and given six months to live. She was 29 years old. As Dee Dee traveled with Brooke to her chemotherapy appointments, they talked about how Brooke wanted a platform to help inform young women about the dangers of breast cancer. "Nobody thinks that someone who is 29 years old can be diagnosed with breast cancer," Dee Dee says. Brooke wanted to teach the importance of self-exams and early diagnosis, and to raise money for the cause. *Josie Jo* came as an answer to prayer. "A wonderful man donated money to help fund the project, God sent us an illustrator, and the next thing we knew, we had a book."

Brooke tirelessly promoted the book and breast cancer awareness through radio, television, and book signings, her mother says. All proceeds were donated to breast cancer research and to defray the expenses of women undergoing treatment. Little girls came