

Covenanter Ann Richards went clowning in Moscow last fall with Patch Adams.

# To Russia with Laughs

STAN FRIEDMAN

Ann Richards can't stop thinking about the five-year-old orphan in Moscow who had never walked because she had cerebral palsy and the orphanage staff had decided simply to keep her in a crib. One of the nurses, however, motioned Richards to the crib and lifted the child into her arms.

"She was as tall as a five-year-old but skinny," says Richards, who held the child for an hour. "The hardest part was when I had to put her in the crib."

Then there was the three-year-old girl who would run away from Richards only to turn around and charge at her to be picked up and embraced. The routine was repeated over and over. "She was just wanting someone to pick her up," Richards says. "They are so starved for attention and want people to be with them."

Richards, a longtime member of Batavia Covenant Church in Batavia, Illinois, did more than hold children in Moscow. She brought laughter and hope when she traveled there for two weeks last November with the famed clown (and doctor) Patch Adams and thirty-eight other clowns from eleven nations.

Adams, founder of the Gesundheit! Institute, is best known for his groundbreaking use of humor to help patients and was the subject of a 1999 movie

starring Robin Williams. Richards considers it a privilege to have worked alongside Adams, who has made frequent trips around the world to entertain children.

"If it weren't for him, this kind of trip wouldn't be possible," she says. Adams also has brought clowns to Tibet, Italy, and China. "He believes in humor and healing to lift people's spirits," Richards says.

Richards learned of the trip in a magazine for clowns who work in hospitals, but she almost did not make the journey. "I applied late," Richards says. "I didn't think there would be any chance I could go."

That Richards would even make the trip doesn't surprise her pastor, Mark Nilson.

"That's just Ann," he says. When he learned that she paid for the trip herself without asking for donations, he added, "That sounds like Ann, too."

"She's always thinking of others and

what she can do for them," says Laura Fanning, a fellow member of the church.

Richards has been a clown for four years since attending a special camp



Ann Richards as Bubbles the clown

at the University of Wisconsin in La Crosse. She often volunteers at hospitals—a regular stop for her is the Michealsen Health Center at the Holmstad, a Covenant retirement center in Batavia.

Clowns from around the world brought diverse styles of clowning. Richards's character is Bubbles, a cleaning lady who carries a feather duster, "plunger trombone," and kazoo. Richards says she always brings bubbles with her to show her audience the variety of colors that can be found in them. Those colors, she explains, are like the rainbow in Genesis, reminding us that God keeps his promises.

When Richards arrived in Moscow, she found a place where promises, at first glance, seemed hard to keep.

"It is a country of phenomenal paradox," Richards says. "There's the extreme poverty and moroseness of the people and the luxury of the palaces. After a while it's overwhelming."

There are 250,000 orphans living in the shadows of those palaces. Parents who can no longer afford to take care of their children bring them to orphanages. These children make up 85 percent of those in the orphanages, Richards says. "The children must live with the knowledge that their parents abandoned them," she says.

Many of the orphanages are dreary places in deteriorated buildings where finding hope might take some time. In some, the orphans are allowed to stay awake roughly eight hours a day. The rest of the time they are medicated so that they sleep.

Richards was struck by the blank faces on some of the orphanage attendants. It was the lack of the staff interest in the children's welfare that was most disturbing to Richards. When the clowns would put smiley faces on the staff's white jackets, "they would just tear them off," Richards recalls. In some places, the clowns were told not to give the children toys because the staff would take them away.

Richards says she wanted the visits to bring hope to the children, many of whom have bleak futures.



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"They are not prepared to leave the orphanage," Richards says, "so when they leave, many of the boys become drug dealers and the girls wind up in the sex slave trade."

If joy could not be found at the orphanages, Richards and the rest of the clowns were determined to import it. "It was amazing, really amazing," says Richards. "The children wait all year for the clowns to come. I would hardly believe that four or five clowns for the afternoon could make such a difference."

Richards adds: "The ones I remember the most are the ones that first seemed so hard and then when we left were smiling all over."

A girl of about eleven at first gave a cold response to the clowns. She did not care for the silly hats the clowns brought to give away. "At the end," Richards recalls, "she was picking up other children and sharing hats."

The story of another girl proved that hope could persist. Svetlana had

been a patient in one of the hospitals that the clowns had visited during an earlier trip. Svetlana was so moved by the clowns that she learned English and traveled sixteen hours to help them with interpreting.

But the clowns often played without language, which proved educational for Richards.

"Some of the people already had been on several international trips, and their ability to work without language was amazing," she says. "It was a marvel to watch. The art of being silly on a kid level was just a marvel to watch."

She adds, "I'm not funny, I'm really not. It's just that wearing the character gives me the freedom to be funny."

That willingness to put on a clown costume and make themselves silly for children helped bond the troupe together, says Richards. "I would look at them and think, 'I am traveling with this bizarre group of misfits.' Some of

Stan Friedman is a staff writer for Covenant Communications.

them were pretty out there so it was an adventure, too.”

Part of that adventure included making the trip while wearing their clown costumes—even as they boarded planes in their native countries. Richards says she had no real problem with security checks other than when they left Moscow.

Richards’s handbag—a ten-inch-square palm with large fingers—was traveling through the X-ray equipment when the agents saw something suspicious. The object of the agents’ concern turned out to be a gag fork that extended to four feet. Richards says she had forgotten it was in the bag.

“I told him he could keep it if he wanted,” Richards says. “He did, and they all had good laughs with it.”

Traveling in clown costume had other benefits as well. As the group waited in Copenhagen for a flight, they had the opportunity to entertain the children at the airport. One particular boy was especially enthralled. He signed the large autograph book that Richards had brought along.

Richards still is trying to digest the experience, which includes having a friend translate her autograph book, filled with crayon messages from the children she met.

“It was wonderful,” she says. “A lot of the children signed it or drew pictures.”

Richards isn’t sure whether she will return to Moscow but is giving it consideration. Referring to the girl with cerebral palsy, Richards says, “I always think of that girl, and I want to go back.”

Whether she returns with Adams also isn’t clear to Richards at this time. She is considering working with a Christian organization, Children’s HopeChest, which offers care and training to orphans.

If she does return, it won’t be empty-handed. “I want to make a book that has different textures and fabrics on each page to take back,” Richards says. “Kids love those.” □