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HEALTH

Healing also comes when you show them you care

KAREN GARLOCH

Dr. Sheila Kilbane finished pediatrics training at Carolinas Medical Center in 2005 and joined a Charlotte doctors' group, thankful to begin private practice.

It's what she wanted. Or so she thought.

Two years later, at 37, she quit to think about a way to practice medicine while spending more time with patients.

While figuring things out, she visited a mentor at Ohio State University medical school, who had this advice:

Sheila, you must go to Russia in the fall. It will change your life.

He had made the trip himself with Patch Adams, a doctor, clown and social revolutionary who has devoted his life to giving away medical care.

Adams, you may recall, was portrayed by actor Robin Williams in a movie about his founding of the Gesundheit Institute, a West Virginia medical practice that has treated thousands for free.

As part of his quest, Adams travels the world, bringing laughter to orphans and hospitalized children, in the belief that humor heals as much as medicine and machines.

But before Kilbane spent \$4,500 for a two-week clowning mission to Moscow and St. Petersburg, she needed to know more. She visited the West Virginia practice, and the dedication of its employees convinced her that spending time with Adams would be worthwhile.

She signed up for the November 2007 trip. And she created a clown persona with a feathery pink boa and pink polka dot pants, made especially for her by the Gesundheit Institute caretaker.

Kilbane thinks she has a good sense of humor, but she couldn't bring herself to wear this costume to the airport, as organizers strongly suggested.

When she arrived at Dulles airport in Washington, she was surprised to find her traveling companions -- 36 people from 11 countries, ages 9 to 74 -- all in character.

They wore face paint, striped pants, red noses and glittery sunglasses.

At 6-foot-4-inches, Adams stood out. He wore a handlebar mustache and a waist-length ponytail -- half white and half blue.

Kilbane wanted to crawl back into her white coat. "I was so uncomfortable, I wanted to jump out of my skin."

But as the trip progressed, she relaxed. At first, when visiting orphans and sick children, she relied on a "bag of tricks" -- bubbles, crayons, rubber balls, face paint.

Then one day, a Danish "clown" encouraged her to leave the tricks behind. She followed Adams' lead, talking, cuddling and laughing with the children.

"They just needed to be held," Kilbane said. "You would pick them up, and it was like they were soaking up affection."

With her mission to Russia, Kilbane helped a lot of children. She also realized, once again, that there is more to health care than medicines and machines.

She's still not sure what her next move is. But she knows this much: "Half of healing," she said, "is just letting them know that you care."

Health Karen

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