



Clowns, fools and jesters are able to tackle issues that are taboo with immunity

AGENTS OF CHANGE LAUGH FACTOR: WORKING HARD TO MAKE PEOPLE HAPPY

By Nadia Rosenthal

Most people know about Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), the international organisation of doctors working on the frontlines to bring their services to those who need them in refugee camps, disaster areas and war zones. But few know about Clowns Without Borders, an organisation which also works in areas of crisis, but rather than addressing people's physical needs it is concerned with their psychosocial wellbeing. Quite simply, the organisation works to make people happy.

With the motto "No Child Without A Smile", Clowns Without Borders uses the art of clowning to bring relief, particularly to



Jamie McLaren

children, in areas of crisis through laughter and play. It was a Spanish clown, Tortell Poltrona, who founded the organisation in 1993 after he was invited to perform at a refugee camp in Croatia and realised how badly needed and powerful laughter was to these people. Various independently run chapters of the organisation have since sprung up in several other countries.

Jamie McLaren Lachman founded Clowns Without Borders South Africa in 2004. Since its inception, the organisation has spread laughter to over 185 000 children and caregivers within South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Southern Sudan and Ethiopia.

Lachman, who's name quite appro-

priately means “laugh man” in German, was in Cape Town recently, exploring the possibilities of setting up ongoing projects and partnerships in the Western Cape. *The Big Issue* was able to catch up with him to get more details.

“**The idea of establishing Clowns**

Without Borders SA came as an answer to many of the issues I had been grappling with for most of my life. I was born in Johannesburg but when I was six months old my parents, who were anti-apartheid activists, moved to America in 1976 for political reasons, continuing their activism there and exposing me to these social issues from a young age.

I have always been an artist and a performer...Throughout my twenties I grappled with finding ways in which I could use my art to engage with and have a social impact on the world. At the age of 25 I studied physical theatre at the Dell’Arte International School of Physical Theatre in Northern California. I was particularly taken by their focus on ‘theatre of place’ that was concerned with bringing theatre to the people rather than having it in theatres that are inaccessible and prohibitive to most. I was later involved in a theatre company whose defining aim was to perform in public spaces that were open and accessible to all.

In 2002 I had an epiphanic moment when I realised that I needed to reconnect with my roots by engaging with the social and development needs of this country. It came in Cape Town at the end of a long holiday in which I was feeling emotionally and spiritually wasted from experiencing the hedonistic life of the tourist travelling through some of the poorest parts of South Africa. On returning to the States I met Moshe Cohen, who was the founder of Clowns Without Borders USA and I knew that I needed to bring this work back to my home country and start Clowns Without Borders South Africa. It has been a perfect fit ever since.

Clowns Without Borders SA has a core staff of 10 facilitating artists and it also draws on a larger community of 80 artists throughout South Africa for various projects.

At the epicentre of the work of Clowns Without Borders is psychosocial support of children who have had their childhoods taken from them because of trauma or crisis. Our aim is to reawaken their ability to laugh, play and strengthen their emotional resiliency.



We use clown shows as the entry point into the community — to break the ice and capture the interest and attention of the community members. The shows use the powerful tool of humour to address and explore difficult issues facing the community such as gender, HIV/Aids, violence and poverty.

Traditionally, in many cultures, the clown, the jester, the fool, or the trickster has always had licence to reveal or tackle issues that might be taboo in individuals or in a society. The clown is able to do this because he tackles these issues with a mischievous playfulness and a childish innocence. We laugh at a clown when he reveals our follies and oversights because, at the same time, he is exposing himself and encouraging us to laugh at him. Clowning work encourages us to reveal ourselves and laugh at ourselves and each other in a spirit of compassionate playfulness, inviting us to engage in the space of relationship with each other.

The clown exists for the audience and in clowning there is a sense of complicity and connection between the performer and the audience. We play the full range of emotions in the human experience — the 10 000 joys and the 10 000 sorrows — hopefully bringing a sense of cathartic release and celebration to those who need it most.

We have come to understand that the guardian-child relationship is the most important structure for the psychosocial support of children, and so we aim to strengthen this relationship and ensure that it is as strong and supportive as possible.

After capturing the interest of the community with the clowning shows we implement longer artist residencies where we work with the children and their guardians using clowning, circus skills, games, mindfulness and story-telling to cultivate a sense of play and build the relationships between the guardians and children. These residencies culminate in the participants staging their own show for the community. Beyond this our community partners help facilitate ongoing psychosocial support groups for the guardians and children.

We have been running a programme in KwaZulu-Natal, Swaziland and Lesotho since 2004 called Njabulo Residency Programme, which works with children and their guardians affected by HIV/Aids.

In view of creating longer-term sustainability we create partnerships with local community-based organisations and train community workers to be facilitators of our work, so that the support can be sustained even when we ourselves are no longer there. We mentor these programmes until they are able to stand on their own feet.

My personal goal within the organisation is to pass on leadership and direction of Clowns Without Borders to other artists and facilitators in Southern Africa so that it may continue to grow and live beyond the efforts of one person. At the same time, I am extremely interested in learning new ways of measuring our impact in the field. As a result, for the next year I will be studying Evidence Based Social Intervention at Oxford. **TBI**”