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Opinion

Laughter to heal scars

March 10, 2009 *Edition 1*

Greg Ardé

JAMIE McLaren Lachman describes himself as a "clown". He means it too.

The softly spoken, 32-year-old South African-American has dedicated the past five years to making sad people smile.

Born to medical doctors of Scottish and Jewish extraction in Johannesburg, McLaren Lachman was raised in Connecticut, US, after his family emigrated in 1976.

After studying culture at Yale University and physical theatre at Dell'Arte School in California, he returned to South Africa in 2002.

Travelling around the country on a fabulously favourable rand-dollar exchange rate, McLaren Lachman said he and his girlfriend were able to wander far and wide, and they experienced life in rural, poverty-stricken South Africa.

The couple was "emotionally and spiritually wasted" by the experience.

"We vowed not to come back unless we could give something back."

Eighteen months later, after a fundraising tour across the US, McLaren Lachman came back to start Clowns Without Borders in South Africa.

The organisation was originally formed in 1993 as a response to the war in Bosnia. It now has representation in nine countries. In South Africa, the organisation employs 10 artists who have performed for 130 000 people, mostly children at 400 rural schools.

On the face of it, Clowns Without Borders' mission is feel-good stuff. But it's far from a lark. It's an undertaking that involves fundraising, financial accountability and lots of co-ordination.

The clowns, thanks to Imperial Car Rental-Europcar, travel deep into rural areas like Ingwavuma in northern KwaZulu-Natal and Big Bend in Swaziland.

Where the cars can't take them, like remote places in Lesotho, ponies do the trick.

Their shows are targeted at children affected by HIV/Aids, or communities devastated by storms or drought, unemployment and poverty. They also work in communities affected by violence, like visiting refugee camps for victims of xenophobia last June.

"Laughter is cathartic and these people need an emotional release," McLaren Lachman says.

"Artists like Charlie Chaplin and Mr Bean have universal appeal. We walk around with big, red noses and we wear baggy pants and wrecked shoes. Children who are suffering from trauma identify with us immediately."



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McLaren Lachman and his entourage spend their time at play.

The juggling, tricks, singing, dancing and storytelling is accessible and fun, but it is also underpinned by important lessons.

"We're clowning around, but everything has meaning: it helps children and their guardians deal with trauma and loss."

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McLaren Lachman says that while children automatically identify with play, some are so badly scarred they have cocooned themselves from the world.

He tells the story of a nine-year-old boy in Swaziland who became infected with HIV from washing his dying mother. When McLaren Lachman first encountered the wary child he was emotionally vacant.

"He was so reticent, it took a long time to break through to him, but when we did he had this huge smile and it was all worthwhile. We ended up driving around a field near his village, with him sitting on my lap, steering the car. He was delighted."

McLaren Lachman says play reconnects children with their imagination and reassures them, making them feel less vulnerable.

Clowns Without Borders conducts programmes that work through bereavement, discrimination and being ostracised - all issues experienced by orphans and members of child-headed households.

Adults who are suffering emotional or physical pain take longer to draw out, McLaren Lachman says.

"We had a caregiver whose entire family was wiped out by Aids and the community had insisted that she take care of two Aids orphans who were in a similar situation.

"She couldn't connect with the children. She was dealing with her own loss and the orphans had been foisted on her. She was visibly unhappy.

"By the time we left that village that old woman was smiling. She had a chance to work through her issues and she wanted the children. She opened up in a group meeting. It was heartwarming. She thanked us for making her realise that there was still love in her and she wanted to share it with her children."

McLaren Lachman says the misery the clowns are exposed to can be challenging, but the compassion and generosity inherent in the work is a tonic for them too.

"You are giving of yourself, but you are receiving so much. There is a love in the connection and sometimes the hardest part is to leave. The whole village turns out for us. When we perform, everything becomes part of the show, even the goats and the sheep and the town drunks.

"We teach the children how to put on a show. At the end of the week they do, and they are the stars."

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Clowns Without Borders has a deliberate strategy to leave programmes in place that entrench playtime after McLaren Lachman and his colleagues leave.

Programmes range from mindfulness awareness exercise to playing games.

"Sometimes people are so stressed by their lives they don't realise that a simple thing like throwing a ball to one another can make life seem easier. My life path is one of awakening greater joy in my life and for others. Happiness is one little step at a time. It's a circle of laughter and it can change the world."

McLaren Lachman never thought that being a clown could be such a meaningful business. Although, he adds: "When I tell people I'm a clown, I don't always say it with a straight face, sometimes I smile."

For more information about Clowns Without Borders visit:
<http://www.cwbsa.org>



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