

## Unanticipated Wisconsin Hospitalization By Don Burda



*It was June 3rd through the 9th, 2000, the third week of Clown Camp® which was the Reunion Week celebrating the 20 years that Clown Camp® had been in existence. Excitement was in the air as clown entertainers, instructors and participants were arriving from all parts of the world. It was difficult to believe but somehow 20 years had passed since this very successful educational clown program was first initiated. This reunion week was going to be a very special week because a variety of national and international clown entertainers were being featured in a series of headliner shows throughout the week. I was in charge of producing two "All Star Clown Review Shows", one at the La Crosse Center in downtown La Crosse and one at Cartwright Center on the University Campus, both were scheduled on the same evening with approximately 45 minutes between shows.*

*However, the week before the Reunion Week, I had been feeling weak and tired and had difficulty breathing and I attributed it to an allergy problem, still I was able to continue lecturing and performing, per my planned schedule. However, on Tuesday morning, May 30th, Dee and I had a 8:15 a.m. "Staff on Stage" performance. I woke up gasping for air and had difficulty walking up the few steps to the second floor, where the men's restroom and shower was located. I had difficulty shaving and showering and returned to our room still gasping for air, but after approximately 20 minutes of just sitting on the foot of my bed, I felt better, so I applied my make up and got prepared to perform the show. I asked Lee Mullally to help run my sound and informed him that I was not sure if I could complete the show as planned with my continuous vocal comedy patter, so I informed him to be prepared for some changes if it became necessary. I started the show talking but approximately half way through the show, I could not continue using my voice, so I asked Lee to start the music and I informed the audience that I would now perform some of my pantomime acts. Dee and I continued the show in pantomime even though my breathing difficulties became more severe. I still performed a lecture that afternoon at 4:00 p.m. and worked the Benefit Auction that evening as the auctioneer for two and a half hours. Somehow I got through it, but still blamed all my problems on allergies. The rest of the week I continued working as scheduled but it became more difficult each day.*

*Then the Reunion Week started and on Sunday, June 4th, Dee and I were involved in the Newlywed Game that involved four couples. We had performed in this game in 1986, the first year we had been instructors at Clown Camp®, and it was decided that it would be fun to recreate it fourteen years later. However, during the game I had more and more difficulty trying to breath, but did get through the program. That same evening, we were going to attend the evening performance at Cartwright Center, but I finally decided I needed to receive some medication for my allergies, so I drove our friends, Leon and Linda McBryde and Dee to the Center, dropped them off and asked them to save me a seat while I drove over to Gunderson Lutheran Hospital to the emergency room to receive some medication. However, after I informed the nurse what my problem was, she brought in two doctors and they took some x-rays and informed me that I had a severe heart attack approximately five to seven-days prior to this date and they were surprised I was still alive. I had water around my heart and in my lungs and my heart was straining to continue to operate. They immediately contacted protective services at the University to contact my wife and placed me in an urgent care unit. Upon checking my heart the next morning, Monday June 5th, it was found that I would need to have a quadruple bypass the next day. Of course I informed my doctor that it was impossible to have that done at this time because I still had two shows to produce on Thursday evening, June 8th and I had not finished working out all the details. They informed me that I had better understand that if they did not perform the operation on the 6th, I might not survive, so I realized I needed to turn things over to someone else regarding the shows. Smart idea, Hmmm? The Clown Camp Staff took over and assigned Bruce Johnson to produce the*

*La Crosse Center show and Leon McBryde to produce the Cartwright Center show, of course many other entertainers, too numerous to mention by name got involved and helped put the shows together. And like the professionals that they are, both shows were tremendous successes.*

*It was now the day before my surgery and Reunion Week moved on, while I was laying in bed frustrated that I could not be involved. So I informed the medical staff at the Gunderson Hospital that I needed a phone in my room that I could use to communicate with my family and the show staff at Clown Camp if they did not know what I had set up for the shows before I was hospitalized. It took some persuading, but the doctors realized I would be more stressed if they prevented me from communicating with anyone, so they agreed to connect the phone in my room. Shortly thereafter, I received a call regarding something I had forgotten about. It involved posters that Jim Howle had painted of the Clown Hall of Fame Inductees that had also been instructors at Clown Camp®. Since my clown character, "Homer" was inducted in 1995, my character was on the poster and I had autographed a large number of Jim's posters, but it was discovered that approximately 100 to 130 were signed by the other inductees, but were still not signed by me, and they wondered if I was able to finish signing them before my surgery the next day. I asked my nurse and she presented the question to my doctor and after a few moments he informed me that I would probably be more upset if I was not able to sign them, so they gave me permission to autograph them if I took my time in doing it. Within an hour Linda McBryde and Jackie LeClaire arrived in my hospital room with the 100 plus posters and I slowly autographed all of them without any problems.*

*Later that day and into the night before my surgery, I had visitors arriving with the permission of the hospital staff as long as they did not stay long. In fact, two clowns in full make up, (I shall keep them unnamed), arrived in my room the night before my surgery after midnight to say a little prayer with me. I asked them how they got into the room and they said they talked one of the nurses on duty into understanding that they would not wake me if I was asleep, but they had to say a prayer for me and they had to be with me. I think the nurse might have been in trouble if someone at the hospital found out she let them in, but it worked out because I was still awake and I did appreciate the concerns and prayers that were shared with me late that night.*

*The second day after my surgery, I was walking and moving around fairly well, the operation was a success. I was also allowed visitors, but the hospital did not expect the numbers of visitors that showed up. The tally was well over 100 visitors during the next few days. At one time a nurse told me they were sending up only two or four at a time and there were between 20 to 25 clowns, some in make-up and some without, waiting in the waiting room of the floor I was on. The hospital staff informed me that they had never seen anything like that before. And after several days of continuous visits from the staff and participants who were at Clown Camp, the hospital staff came to the conclusion that clowns were a very special group of people that truly showed their caring and loving ways with people who needed encouragement during difficult times.*

*I was released from the hospital in 6 days, but was not allowed to drive home to California for 10 days after my release, so Rich and Jan Snowberg opened their hearts to us and asked us to stay at their home for that period of time. It made my recuperation time very pleasant and we had a terrific time, sharing their wonderful home with us. One night the Kenny Ahern family brought dinner over and we all enjoyed a special night of visiting and reminiscing. The 10 days passed rapidly and it was a wonderful experience that Dee and I will never forget and deeply appreciated. We even took in a concert at the Riverside Park, attended Sunday church services with Rich and Jan at their church and did many other wonderful things to help me recuperate. And after ten days, we got the OK from the hospital to start our driving trip home back to California, which was close to 2500 miles.*

*We can never thank the Gunderson Lutheran Hospital enough for the wonderful care I and my family received during my life threatening experience. The Doctors, Nurses and General Staff were the best that you could ever find and the facilities were absolutely terrific. I was so blessed to have that facility so near when my heart attack was diagnosed and I shall always be thankful we were in La Crosse, Wisconsin when my heart attack took place.*

*But the story does not end there. Upon our return home to Sunnyvale, California, we were home only five days when my wife, Dee, became very ill with a gall bladder attack and she was taken into the hospital where she was also diagnosed with ovarian cancer in an advanced stage. She had to have immediate surgery, which was eight and one half hours long and since has had two more surgeries, plus continuous chemo treatments. She has had only two brief periods of time that she has not been on chemo treatments since July of 2000, and has had continuous chemo treatments and 10 days of radiation since September of 2002. Dee has also been at all Clown Camp®s since she was diagnosed with cancer and has had to receive weeklong chemo treatments during the time we have been at Clown Camp® in 2003 and 2004 at the same Gunderson Lutheran Hospital in which I had my surgery. One of the many things that both Dee and I have learned from these life-threatening experiences is that one can only survive if a positive attitude is maintained even through the most difficult times. Yes, both of us have had bad days, but you have to work your way through them. To survive, you have to keep the faith that God is working with you, and that by keeping your life as normal as possible even with treatments and dozens of doctor visits, you will continue to enjoy each and every day of your life.*

*However, we did not do this alone, we survived because of the tremendous support and love that was shared with us by all our relatives and friends from all parts of the world. We received almost 400 get well cards, plus tons of e-mails, from 9 different countries, and after receiving too many flowers, we asked people not to send any more, so they asked what they could send and we told them to send small stuffed animals so we could pass them on to children in hospitals after things settled down for us. Well, you guess it, small stuffed animals came in bunches through the mail, it was unbelievable, and of course, clown friends led the pack in sending us stuffed animals. It was so wonderful to see so much support and love shared with us. And we want everyone to know that this has attributed to the fact that we are still both active and enjoying life, even though major health problems still exist.*

*The year is now, 2005, and 25 years have passed since Richard Snowberg started a Clown Camp that nobody could ever imagine would become such a success. Dee and I have been a part of this wonderful program since 1986 and even with the unexpected health problems we have encountered since that 20th reunion in 2000, our friendships have continue to grow as we meet new people in the clowning profession. We are back for this 25th Reunion Week, we are loving every minute of it. We also know that with God's help and all the love and support we continue to receive from the many friends we have made along life's path, our love for enjoying life will always continue in our hearts. Thank you all for being there for us, we shall always be grateful. (Don Burda-Sunnyvale, California)*