

She's back to clowning around

Knee surgery gets popular clown back on her feet

Betty Crabtree's favorite pastime is clowning around, so it was no joke when her knees gave out on her. The 73-year-old dynamo has volunteered at Methodist Hospital for more than 20 years, much of that time dressed as her alter ego, Ruffles the Clown.

Ruffles has distracted kids in pain and raised smiles and hopes along the way for hundreds of pediatric patients at Methodist. Then, last year, the pain in Crabtree's knees, which started when she was in her 30s, became too much to bear.

"I had to give up volunteering. I went in for the Easter party [in 2008] before my surgery. My husband Elmo took me and dropped me off, so I wouldn't have so far to walk. I thought I was going to die before I got to that door because it hurt so bad," Crabtree recalls. "I would just wear my pajamas around the house. My husband would try to coax me to get moving by offering to take me out to eat, but it wasn't worth the effort to me."

Crabtree says the realization of how poor the quality of her life had become hit her one day as she sat in her favorite recliner, where she was spending more and more of her time.

"I remember sitting there and thinking, 'You are either going to die in this chair, or you are going to get up and do something about it,'" she says. "That very day I called Shelbourne Knee Center at Methodist Hospital."

SURGERY ENDS PAIN

Tests showed Crabtree could benefit from joint replacement in both knees, so she decided to have both done at the same time in May 2008.

Kevin Scheid, MD, with OrthoIndy, did the surgery; and Scott Urch, MD, from the Shelbourne Knee Center, managed Crabtree's case post-operatively and through her rehabilitation.

Crabtree says she was amazed by how pain-free she was after the surgery because she had heard plenty of horror stories from friends who had undergone joint replacements elsewhere. She says she "shed many tears in the years before deciding to have surgery," but says she has not shed a single tear since.

Urch believes that is because their practice follows a special protocol that includes the use of Toradol, which he says is a non-narcotic, non-steroidal pain reliever similar to ibuprofen, and a rigorous rehabilitation program, originally designed for young athletes with knee ligament injuries.

REHAB KEY TO SUCCESS

Crabtree had surgery on a Tuesday and began rehab at Methodist the same day. By the following Saturday, she was at Rehabilitation Hospital of Indiana (a Clarian Health Partner), beginning her therapy there.

"When I had my very first session, the therapist wanted to see how many steps I could take using a walker," Crabtree says. "I walked completely across the room with no trouble. She said, 'Nobody ever does that.' From that point on, I did the work. Three times each day they come and get you for another session. They don't ask you if you are ready; they just say, 'Let's go.'"

After a couple of weeks, Crabtree went home and started rehab on an outpatient basis. By fall, Crabtree had resumed many of her old activities. She came as Ruffles to Pediatrics' Halloween and Valentine's Day parties, and she hopes to resume her every-other-week volunteering schedule soon.

▶ Ruffles clowns around at a Valentine's Day party at Methodist Hospital.

▼ Betty Crabtree (aka Ruffles) has volunteered at Methodist Hospital for more than 20 years.



THE CLOWN SMILES AGAIN

"I remember Betty sitting in my office the first time and telling me that she was a clown," says Urch. "I was thinking about how much pain she was in. I could see her being a clown in the sad sense but not in the way that would make kids on the pediatric floors happy. You could just see how important that was to her and how sad she was that she couldn't do that. When I saw her after surgery, she was almost a completely different person. She felt so much better. The first time she told us she had returned to clowning, you could see how happy she was. I am so thrilled for her."

ANOTHER VOLUNTEER OUTLET

Crabtree is thrilled, too, and she has a new volunteer outlet as a result of her surgery – giving blood. Crabtree was required to bank two units of her own blood in case it was needed during surgery. She had never given blood before; and, after seeing how convenient and painless it was, she now gives as often as she can – every 56 days.

Learn more about the Shelbourne Knee Center at aclmd.com.

Clarian Health partners with the Indiana Blood Center to hold periodic on-campus blood drives. Visit the Indiana Blood Center online at donorpoint.org or call Clarian Health Promotions at 962-6346 to learn more.