

The magic of a clown

By Shari Held

For Custom Publications

"I think I was born a clown," said Milly Wozny, reflecting on her chosen mode of volunteering. "For my grandmother, the goal of every day was to put a smile on a face. I have carried that through life."

During World War II, Wozny and her mother lived with her grandparents while her father served overseas. Her grandmother would paint her face with makeup and send her around the neighborhood to cheer up the elderly, the sick and the frightened, helping them forget their troubles for a while.

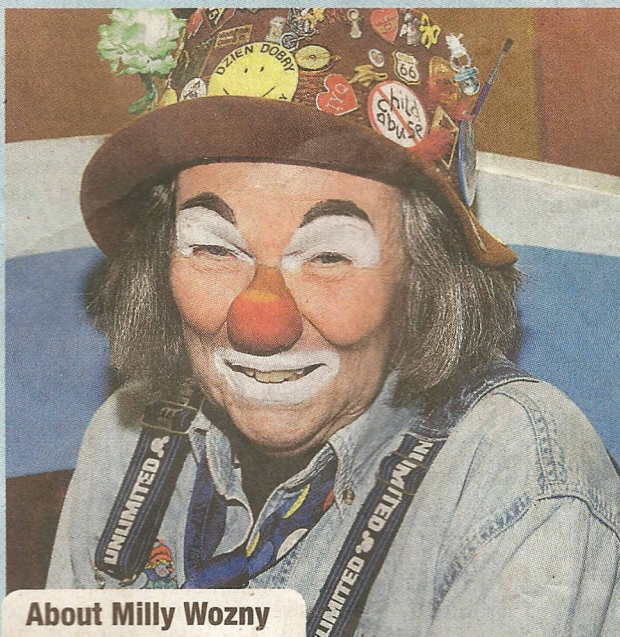
Continuing a legacy

Wozny never forgot the lesson she learned as a child. Even when she married and had her own family (two daughters and a son) and a career, she always managed to volunteer — whether it was with disabled children or Cub Scouts.

"Even though you think you are so busy you can't, you'd be surprised what you can do," she said. "You can always volunteer a smile to a lonely person in a shopping center."

When her youngest daughter was ill as a child and stayed at Methodist Hospital, Wozny knew that someday she'd have the opportunity to give back.

"That's what I am doing now, and I feel good about it," she said.



About Milly Wozny

Volunteer work:

14 years for Methodist Hospital Alzheimer's groups, nursing homes, the Indiana Women's Prison

Family matters

Married 49 years to Hank Wozny. 3 children, 7 grandchildren, 2 dogs.

Wish list:

"I wish all the grandmas and grandpas were out of the nursing homes and that they received more love."

Personal philosophy:

"Live every day to your fullest and help when you can."

A special kind of magic

A few years before her retirement, Wozny got serious about clowning. She joined Smiles Unlimited, a nonprofit organization that matches clowns to groups in need. Since then she's helped thousands of people in nursing homes, Alzheimer's units, hospitals, the Indiana Women's Prison and wherever else there is a need. When she slips into her "Kabaza the Clown" persona, she dons a hobo outfit, a red nose and her sidekick — a goose.

While many clowns entertain with tricks and jokes, Wozny does what she does best: She listens.

"I can't sing. I can't dance. I can't change the world. But I can listen," she said.

Many people, young and old, let down their guard to a clown.

"They will talk to a character," she said. "If something is bothering them, they know it's safe to tell you. Sometimes you leave with a heavy heart, but they feel better."

Wozny listens to children who are scared or bored while their parents are at work or at home tending to their siblings. She hears from the elderly who are lonely, sad or forgotten. In some cases, she learns about abuse and can find help.

Intuitive empathy

There are "nose days," when Wozny is in full costume, and "non-nose days" when she could be mistaken for someone's friendly grandmother. She has volunteered at Methodist Hospital for 14 years, sometimes spending hours rocking sick babies and playing with toddlers.

Bradley Thompson, a writer who interviewed Wozny for a book about people who do God's work through volunteering, nominated her for the Jefferson Award. He witnessed her magic firsthand when Wozny was interacting with a baby who was agitated while receiving intravenous medication.

"The most striking thing about Wozny is the love she shares," Thompson said. "She just patiently held the baby's hand, and it was almost like she could read the baby's mind and knew what that baby was going through. She has a real intuitiveness about her and can sense another person's needs and figure out how to make them happy. It was powerful." ●



History of the Jefferson Awards

In 1972, when the American Institute for Public Service was founded, the goal was to establish national recognition for outstanding community and public service. The Jefferson Awards honor individuals who make a difference in the communities in which they work and live.

Awards are presented on local and national levels. Local recipients are selected by a nationwide network of Jefferson Awards media sponsors who solicit nominations from their viewers and readers. The Indianapolis Star, in conjunction with Eli Lilly and Company, is proud to sponsor the Indiana Jefferson Awards.

The 2008 local finalists:

Jerri Barnes

Riverview Hospital's
Touch of Love program

Cathy Caldwell

Tabitha USA

Gayle Hutchens

Paws and Think program

Tracey Snapp

Share the Spirit Food Drive

Kevin Tyra

Ozanam Legal Clinic

Milly Wozny

Smiles Unlimited
Universal Clown Ministry

To nominate a selfless individual in your community, visit www2.indystar.com/jefferson_awards. Nominations for the 2009 awards are being accepted through Jan. 9, 2009.