

Certified clown not just an every day Bixby citizen

She's been to clown college. She has a clowning degree. She's in-the-know about noses and really, really big shoes. A video of her clown graduation suggests she can even perform some good ole' Buster Keaton antics. Deep down underneath the blue hair and red skirt, she's also a Bixby mom

BY JO ANN NOEL
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"Clowning has to be a passion. Clowning has to come from the heart."

Chatters

Television might suggest that "Just do it!" applies to sports.

That's not so in the situation of Sherry Ayers, Bixby, who, if you meet her in costume (as Chatters the clown) on the street, might just be the one with the chicken pops in her pocket.

Hmmmmmm?

Actually, she's the one with the blue hair, although she's not an old lady, red nose and chicken pops in her pocket.

"I've wanted to be a clown since high school," Ayers explained recently during an interview.

She had a flashback in which she remembered seeing a pink-haired clown in San Diego twisting balloons. She thought to herself, "I want to do that."

"Years and years later," says Ayers, who doesn't appear to be years and years old, said a friend of hers was having a party for one of her daughters but didn't want to go to the

expense of hiring a clown.

Ayers volunteered to be the clown.

"I went to Wal-Mart and bought the costume off the shelf and the multi-colored wig and thought I looked gorgeous," she said.

"I did that for a few years before I found Colorado Clowns and realized I looked awful."

Chatters the Clown was born.

Says Ayers, there is a real way to put on clown make-up, a real way to clown and clown tricks.

After finding out how to clown the real way, she did another birthday party for the same family, younger daughter.

"I graduated from clown college," says Ayers. "I have a diploma and everything."

As she speaks her graduation skit is on TV, and children are laughing.

So what does it take to be a clown? Was she always outgoing and funny?

"I didn't used to be outgoing," Ayers said. "In junior high I got straight A's, but I refused to get in front of the class to read a report and I got an F."

"Once you start putting the make-up on, something hap-



CHICKEN' N DRESSING? Bixby's Chatters the Clown puts clothes on her rubber Chicken'n dressing. Charlie Chicken's boots are laid out so he can become a Chicken'n ranch dressing. Photo by Jo Ann Noel

pens. We tell the kids it's magical."

Ayers' clown education at Colorado Clown College lasted 10 weeks, a time during which she learned to juggle, face paint, ballooning and skits.

She also studied The Art of Clowning in three eight-week classes with a Ringling Brothers Clown.

"We did pie-throwing and had a whole class day learning how to spit properly," she said.

With the Art of Clowning

classes there were a lot of silly things, she said, explaining there's a lot of physical antics in circus clowning.

"There's more to clowning than putting on a costume. There's a lot of skill involved, a lot of education."

Ayers belongs to Clowns of America International and the World Clown's Association.

In COAI alone there are 6,000 registered clowns.

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certified clown.....

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"When you get into it, it's huge," she said.

Some of her fellow clowns decided to start a clown alley in Tulsa called Clowns Around Tulsa-Town.

Ayers is herself teaching these days, too.

She's in the sixth week of a 10-week class. In addition, she's preparing to do three classes at the Bixby Community Center, one of clowning, one on magic, and a third on balloons.

The classes are more "clown education," she says.

She's not going to wear make-up.

One reason is that movies, i.e., *IT* and *Air-Bud*, have made clowns out to look mean.

Although she would prefer not to emphasize that clowns are real people, she plans to do that in these classes.

"I'm going to talk about the kinds of clowns and that clowns are real people," she says.

"Little kids need to know that all clowns are not mean."

There's a method to going up to kids as a clown. "You kneel and ask kids if it's all right to come up to them. You remember that kids are people, too."

There are, she says, actually three kinds of clowns, and each clown, once he/she gets into clowning must decide which to be.

She is an Auguste clown. The other choices are white face or tramp.

There's a pecking order she says.

The white face clown is always the leader.

"The white faced clown is always in charge, very prim and proper," she said.

The Auguste gets the pies in the face even when he/she may be the one who plotted the pie to land in someone else's face. It is the Auguste clowns who fumble, trip and fall.

Tramps are sad.

Auguste is a German word, she says, which means silly or stupid.

The silly clown got its start in German when a clown did not plan to go on stage but was helping everyone else get ready, she says.

He accidentally fell onto the stage, and the audience shouted, "Auguste."

"In class you go through all three and then pick one clown personality," she says.

"Some tramps are now doing happy faces but are still sad."

"The hobo is more down on his luck, sad," she said. "There are also a lot of bag ladies starting to emerge."

One big thrill for her has been meeting Emmett Kelly's son.

Kelly was a famous sad-faced clown.

She attended the Emmett Kelly Festival in Houston, Mo., where she became friends with Emmett Kelly, Junior.

So did she want to be a clown



LIKE MOTHER LIKE DAUGHTER: Squirt and Chatters "give each other five." Photos by Levi Luker



CLOWNING AROUND: Chatters the clown strikes some poses for photographer Levi Luker

as a child?

"You grow up with a lot of musicals in school. Emmett Kelly and musicals have always been around," she says.

"If you like kids and working with them, this logically seems like the next step," she says.

"Becoming a clown and then meeting him was so wonderful."

So what's it like to "wear a nose?"

Ayers said her first nose was soft, and when she first replaced it with a hard nose that she glued on, there was some adjustment, but eventually she got used to it. Now it's easy for her to forget she's even in make-up.

"Teenage boys and men are the most receptive when you're driving," she says. Women tend to be aloof when they see her unless they have kids in the car.

One woman stopped in the middle of the highway to point her out to children in the car.

"In New York and a couple other places it's illegal to drive

in clown make-up," she said.

It's important to always carry identification, something with a picture on it with the individual in clown costume.

Ayers likes being her own boss, making her own schedule, and choosing her own vacations. She also has a clone, Betty Jo, eight, sometimes clowns with her.

Clowning has to be a passion and must come from the heart she says. She worked in day-care the seven years before she started having children. She has been a Sunday school teacher since she was 16.

"If you like kids and working with them, this logically seems like the next step," she says.

However, putting on a clown costume does not make someone a clown any more than putting on a police uniform makes someone a police officer she says.

"There are do's and don'ts, ethics, common sense. You can put on make-up and act silly, but it doesn't make you a clown."

Ayers says she still continues to take child management and clown classes.

"If you think you know too much, you get brown and die."

she said.

She's excited about a clown seminar coming up this week.

"There's always something to learn," she says. "Usually what you learn is not the book learning. It's from someone else's experiences."

"Clowning consumes you," she said. "I eat, breathe and live clowning."

To her delight her husband has signed up for her starters' class.

Is it expensive?

She advises her students to get their initial costumes at the thrift store. His costume cost \$7.50 at the thrift store plus \$10 for a hat.

"I always suggest thrift stores, garage sales and the Dollar Stores," she says. "A Dollar Store is a clown's dream."

Her kids claim she sometimes shops with her clown eyes.

It wouldn't be fair to do this store without mentioning her sidekick Charley the rubber chicken. Yes, Charley has some cowboy boots, not because he lives in Bixby but because he sometimes goes out with "ranch dressing."

Chatters can be seen every Tuesday night at the Golden Corral in Owasso.