

## Alaska Clown Outreach Recap

### Clowns Bring Joy to Arctic Alaska

Whale bones scattered the wind-swept beaches; walrus and seal meat hung from wooden racks outside weather-beaten shacks and broken narrow boardwalks provided walkways over the moist tender tundra. This is what the Kaleidoscope Konnections clown troupe recently experienced early this September during a 2-week Christian outreach trip to arctic Alaska. The five clowns, a sound technician and a cook traveled under the leadership of Pastor Jacob Meadows of the Bickleton Presbyterian Church, the primary sponsor for this outreach. The clowns went prepared to performed three different presentations beginning in Anchorage at Crosspoint Church, a center for developmentally delayed youth and then on to Campbell Elementary school.



Front row, L to R: Joyce Brack, Don Knight, Kathy Knight, Jenn Wilson (cook)  
Back row, L to R: Frank Ward, Maureen Mould, Larry Davis (sound technician),  
Pastor Jacob Meadows

The clowns went on to bring miles of smiles to a juvenile detention center, senior center, hospital and an evening program for the community at the United Methodist Church in Nome. It was an amazing experience to clown with the hardened teens at the juvenile detention center who at first thought that watching some goof-ball clowns was a waste of their time. But as we taught them to spin plates and empowered them to make balloon animals, they began to play along with the clowns, share their stories and even sing together "Jesus Loves Me." One teen demonstrated his athletic prowess by showing us feats usually done at the Eskimo Olympics. We were definitely impressed. The hearts of the teens slowly turned as the clowns watched these young men laugh, play and learn

some new skills. “When will you be back?” they asked as we packed up to leave. Not knowing just how to answer, the clowns left behind several spinning plates, balloon pumps and hundreds of balloons for the teens to use during their stay in the juvenile center.

On the next leg of the trip the clowns traveled by bush plane which proved to be a challenging yet rewarding adventure. Being dropped off by bush plane on a runway in the middle of no where, the clowns and their 950 pounds of gear were transported on 4-wheeled Hondas over hills of gravel, mud, tundra and past open deep pits of ivory excavation.



They had arrived on the St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, inhabited by two remote Yupik Eskimo villages. One village was 30 miles from Siberia, Russia. Both of the isolated villages of Gambell and Savoonga, each with populations of 700, struggle with an extremely high rate of unemployment, addiction and abuse. The villagers are in a time of immense grief due to the high number of recent deaths and suicides among teens and young adults.



In each of the villages the clowns did engaging presentations, all with a message of love, hope and acceptance in a Head Start program, two schools, churches and community programs.



In the school programs, the children learned tools to prevent and avoid bullying and negative peer pressure. One of the school activities in which the children built confidence was balancing spinning plates on the palms of their hands. Just as they needed to fix their eyes on the top of the plate to keep it balanced, they were encouraged to fix their eyes on Jesus who can save them and guide them through all life's challenges. The community and church clown presentations were centered on the healing love and power of Jesus Christ.



Besides the school playground, where both schools lay on the outskirts of each village, there was no place for the children to play...except on abandoned chemical barrels left behind from a construction company or old abandoned and rusty equipment. Occasionally we watched children jumping over planks in mud holes, practicing their skills to jump over ice blocks in the winter time.



On September 11th, the clowns were clowning in the village of Savoonga. At a morning church service, a very worried woman asked for prayers for her son and nephew who had not yet returned, when expected, from hunting reindeer.

Having clowned in NYC just two months after the Twin Towers came down and a year later for the anniversary, this ten year anniversary brought back numerous memories for “OOCHEE.” Remembrances of how the clowns attempted to plant seeds of hope through comic relief to the grief-stricken firefighters, police officers and citizen of our country remained in the forefront of that day.

That evening the clowns joined with the Baptist missionary to collaboratively do an innovative program at a packed “firehouse” which is now being used as a bingo hall and looking as if it were ready to fall down. The evening before there was an unusual phenomenon: a rainbow appeared around the moon. Then that evening on 9-11, we ended our presentation with the Native American Legend of the Rainbow, unbeknownst to us about the rainbow the evening before. Those attending were deeply moved with many tear-filled eyes in the audience. Pastor Jacob observed some of the young adults and teens reactions to the program and commented: “I think we prevented some suicides tonight.”

The saddened elders would ask each and every clown to “pray for our children.” Many elders exclaimed over and over that “This is just what our village needed,” as children and adults laughed, smiled and even cried tears of appreciation. In everything the clowns did, they attempted to bring the color and spirit of love and hope which appeared to be so desperately needed in the villages.



At one community event, an older woman grabbed onto the white feather she was given as if it were her lifeline. Tears streamed down her cheeks as the clown handed it to her with the words: “This is a reminder that God will lift you up on eagle’s wings and hold you forever in the palm of His hand.”

Our return flight from Savoonga to Nome was cancelled due to fog. We missed doing our school program in Nome that afternoon but a special miracle happened later that day. While out in the village visiting some elders, we got word that a plane had landed and was waiting for us. We hitched a ride in a rickety wooden trailer behind a Honda and with mud flying all over us, managed to rush to the runway. Some newly formed friends followed on their Hondas hauling our luggage. The helpful and polite pilot of this 8-seater bush plane looked as if he was still in high school. “I have seats for all of you clowns but I can’t take any of your luggage,” he declared. We didn’t argue because we knew we had another presentation to do later that evening for the Nome United Methodist Church’s children’s program and we were desperate not to miss it and we didn’t!



We would just pray our luggage would make it on the next plane. “OOCHEE” the clown was the only one in full clown gear. Two other clowns had on their faces but not their costumes. Two others were still in street clothes. Our props never

came but one thing that never stays behind is “OOCHEE’s” banjo. While later that evening “OOCHEE” entertained a packed and very hot fellowship hall, the other clowns frantically ran around the church to find whatever they could that would work to put together a meaningful clown show. For a ½ hour the clowns sang, did a mime humming the usual background music and taught a lesson of loving your neighbor as yourself. The full sanctuary of children and adults laughed sang and learned some life lessons in a very unusual way not even noticing that most of them had minimal make-up and no funny shoes. Minutes before ending the show, our bags of props and luggage arrived. “Please hurry and go find the duffel bag with the clown noses,” someone asked a fellow clown. Larry, the sound technician pulled the first duffel bag out of the truck so hard that the end ripped off and hundreds of red sponge noses popped out. And everyone got a red sponge clown nose before leaving the church. God is so good!



The Pastor of the Methodist Church was so gracious in allowing our troupe of eight to use the church van, sleep in the sanctuary, even providing some inflatable mattresses and using their hot shower. She enjoyed us so much that she invited us to return for their summer Vacation Bible School. Our creative impromptu presentation was nothing like the full meal deal but she loved what we did. See her comments on YouTube: <http://youtu.be/3x3SLkQHRoQ> or



Nome AK UMC Pastor Feedback.htm

Just as these endearing Eskimos left a lasting imprint on the troupe’s hearts, the clowns seemed to leave behind grins of joy and an invitation to return. Only God knows when that will be but in the meantime each and every person the clowns encountered now has a red sponge nose to hold dear to their hearts.

