

Megan Makes a Difference
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In January of 2008, the Aleppo Shriners held their first Ceremonial event of the year, which proved to be a very meaningful and memorable day. First of all, we welcomed 16 new members into the Aleppo Shrine family. Secondly, we installed the 2008 Potentate and his Divan into their respective officer roles for the ensuing year. Third, and perhaps the most inspiring of all, we had the opportunity to meet Ms. Megan Johnson. Megan made this day exceptional and she will certainly be remembered for a very long time.

During the traditional part of the Ceremonial, we were introduced to Megan, our special guest of the day. She has been a patient in the Shriners Hospital in Portland Oregon for several years, undergoing dozens of surgeries for a debilitating birth defect. Megan was born with hemifacial dysplasia which resulted in a cleft lip and other serious facial bone-growth problems.

Megan spoke to us about her journey as a patient, taking us all on a trip down her own personal memory lane. She told us about her difficult times and shared with us her trials and tribulations, explaining how these events have brought her to travel throughout the country to work her magic in helping others. Imagine, a sixteen year old girl who possesses the maturity that rarely comes to someone so young. Her words are chosen with care and her thoughts are communicated with energy and spirit. With renewed convictions and an impressive level of confidence, Megan now travels throughout North America as a spokesperson for the Shriners Hospitals and she is indeed, a rare gift to us all.

In addition to her support for the Shriners Hospitals and charities, Megan has also started her own website. To find out more about her successful charitable endeavors, go to www.megansmission.freesevers.com. This is her project aimed at helping the homeless. She holds fundraisers selling cookies, hot chocolate and apple cider outside her Washington home to raise money for materials to make scarves and blankets and to purchase socks and gloves for those living on Seattle's streets. When the cold weather arrived, Megan was joined by her family and they hit the streets of Seattle to deliver these items to Seattle's homeless. Her latest fundraiser involves selling multi-colored wrist bands to help fund "Megan's Mission" for the homeless.

During her talk, Megan said that another one of her goals was to hug every Shriner she meets. For those of you who know me, I saw this as an opportunity and I always take advantage of an opportunity. The Aleppo Uniformed Units were going through our Parade and Review drill and I was in costume as Woe-No the Clown, my hobo character. When we approached the podium, I jumped out of line and gave Megan a great, big hug. She smiled her beautiful smile and, as luck would have it, a member of the Aleppo Divan was right there with his camera. The result was awesome, as you can see in the accompanying picture. I had this enlarged and framed and I sent it to her. This small gesture started a friendship and an enlightening communication between us.

That cold, January day, I found myself thinking about Megan and how she had turned her life from one of adversity to compassion, ultimately finding her own mission in life, helping others. I also thought about how our paths had crossed. I have been clowning with the Shriners for almost twenty years, spending a considerable amount of time with patients in the Shriners hospitals over the years. For once, I found a unique opportunity to talk with one of our patients and find out what she really thinks about us. Particularly, I thought it would be interesting to find out, first hand, what a patient in a Shriners hospital thinks about clowns. I decided to write to Megan and find out a little more about her. Several e-mails later, I have found out some interesting things about Megan and I'm happy to share them with my friends in Clown Alley.

Megan was first introduced to clowns by a visit from Gary "Punkin" Bowers, a Past Potentate and popular clown from Al Kader Shrine in Portland. Punkin was the first clown to visit her and to spend time enough to give her some comfort and take her mind off the pains from surgery. Punkin connected with her in a truly profound way. Performing tricks with an invisible ball and a paper bag, Punkin made an impression on Megan and changed her life. She remembers being entertained by other clowns after that, and their abilities to spread kindness and joy made Megan feel like a princess. Then and now, she thinks about clowns as heroes, and she would love to give back in some meaningful ways.

Megan has written her first book, entitled, Clowns Make a Difference and she donates monies from the sale of these books to several Shrine charities, including the Sneaker Fund, the Transportation Fund and Shriners Hospitals for Children.

Shrine Clowns have always seemed like family to me and during our social times together, we usually find times to reminisce about our experiences. We talk a lot about interacting with our audiences, especially when we have memorable times with our favorite audiences, our patients. Now, after meeting Megan and getting to know her better, I am happy to share some additional details about her.

Megan has talked with me a little bit about becoming a clown herself. She loves the Auguste Clowns more than the other categories and she's interested in attending clown school. Therefore, she now has an invitation to attend the Northeast Clown Institute in Plymouth, MA. Megan has carefully chosen her clown name to be "Lollypop" and with her spirit and resourcefulness, she's likely to be one of the best clowns around. As clowns are sometimes known to say to each other, I'm looking forward to "bumping noses" with her down the road. However, she likes the prospect of being a prankster, so WATCH OUT for her and Lollypop.

Megan has taught me a lot in a short time and I'm really thrilled to call her my friend. She glows with excitement at Shrine events and her personality is heartwarming and sincere. While she has endured much more than most kids her age, she has persevered and become a shining light in our fraternity. And if you ever wonder if clowns make a difference, here are Megan's own words. Nobody could say it better:

As you can see, you all clowns make a huge impact to us kids by giving us a time to use our imagination and to forget about our problems that we have to deal with in life. The clowns mean the whole world to me! I love them so much! You are all heroes to me!!!! If the Shriners ever think what they do isn't important, just come and talk to me!!! Because of the great love and joy you give us, I have written and published a children's book that just came out. It's called, "Clowns Make A Difference". It's a true story about my first time coming to Shriners Hospitals in Portland and how I didn't like hospitals. Then at the end, a clown comes and visits me and he makes my recovery a lot better. You know, clowns and laughter are the best medicine around!!!!!!

In March of this year, Megan's Dad became a Mason. In her e-mail to me, she said she was "so happy he got his Fellow Craft Degree last night." There was genuine pride in her statement and I'm sure that pride is quite familiar in the Johnson family. Megan makes a difference, for sure.

