

mitzvahot

Face to Face

When a clown visited his hospital room after brain surgery, Bill realized a little cheer can go a long way.

BILL TOTH

“Look at what you’ve produced, Jojo the Magnifico! You’ve done something beautiful.”

My heart jumped upon hearing these words from Professor Zee, a professional clown. With a beaming smile, I looked around to see a dozen of my peers dressed as clowns with makeup and rainbow hair, making balloon animals—and making a difference. I saw my friends bring laughter and joy to the otherwise mundane lives of the patients we were visiting in a nursing home.

Three years earlier, I was lying on a thin hospital mattress, recovering from nine hours of brain surgery and

urges participants not just to become political activists who attend rallies on global issues or who will write letters to Congress, but to be *social* activists: people who will encounter a problem “face to face,” people who will do everything in their power to make even the slightest difference in their communities. I wracked my brain to find a creative way to change someone’s life.

It turned out to be that clown’s visit to my hospital bed that inspired me. He gave up his own time to help make me laugh and asked nothing in return. I felt indebted to him. Fortunately, PANIM, the organization that ran *Panim el Panim*, presented me with an opportunity to repay that debt. PANIM’s staff told us about the Small-Alper Family Foundation’s decision to give \$500 grants to six program alumni who proposed their own significant community service projects.

In the Small-Alper grant, I saw a chance both to continue the cycle of altruism which the clown had precipitated and to

make a small difference in the world. I received the grant in order to create a program that I called “Healing with Laughter.” With the grant money, I hired a mitzvah clown, “Professor Zee,” to come to my school and teach a dozen students how to entertain in a hospital. We then put our newfound skills into practice by visiting a nearby nursing home.

Nothing could have prepared me for the amazing feeling that came with seeing my project come alive. Doing for others what someone else had done for me was one of the greatest feelings I could possibly imagine.

I had evolved from the sick 14-year-old brain cancer patient in need of a reason to laugh to the 17-year-old “Jojo the Magnifico” who *created* a reason to laugh.

Healing with Laughter, however, hasn’t stopped there. Because of my project’s success, I have been awarded a follow-up grant to continue my project. I plan to teach dozens more students how to be clowns, and I hope Healing with Laughter will continue even after I graduate. But even if it doesn’t, I know that I have learned the benefits of social activism and the power of a mitzvah clown. ★

BILL TOTH hails from Marlboro, N.J. He is a senior at the Peddie School and is active in Haganil United Synagogue Youth (USY). He is also the current events editor for the school newspaper, loves to play frisbee and is a die-hard Yankees fan.

“ONE GOOD DEED LEADS TO ANOTHER GOOD DEED.” *Pirkei Avot* 4:2



making a futile attempt to find some glimpse of joy in my sterile hospital room. I quickly grew weary of the plain white walls around me and the inactive life of a recovering cancer patient. I had little to look forward to beyond the long nights of trying to sleep. While I did have reason to smile—the surgery had been successful—I had nothing to laugh about.

Then one day, a clown came to visit me. Despite my skepticism of the comedic effects of a clown on a 14-year-old, he managed to get a laugh out of me. I finally experienced the joy that my bedridden life had been lacking, and I became determined to reinsert myself into the life of a normal middle school student.

Some time after I left the hospital and resumed a more active life, I attended a program called *Panim el Panim*—face to face. The program

