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Long Live Laughter



# A Joyful 'Hart'

Nurse Deb Hart uses laughter to ease life's pains

By Andrea Cheng

Above: A believer in the restorative power of laughter, Deb Hart holds 10-minute "laughter clubs" at businesses in Urbana (shown here and on following pages). Intended to benefit earthquake victims in Haiti, Hart's exercises last February attracted donations, curious children and, of course, laughter.

**Thursday midmorning.** Debra Joy Epstein Hart '79 FAA is decked out in her clown gear – a shirt that reads "Think Globally, Laugh Locally" tucked into violet baggy pants with rainbow-striped pockets, held up by black suspenders imprinted with the faces of The Three Stooges. She wears maroon-and-yellow-striped socks and psychedelic Rocket Dog high-tops embroidered with peace signs and smiley faces. She's a walking fashion disaster, from the color clashes and mismatched prints right down to the miniature plush Winnie the Poohs attached to her shoes. The only thing missing is her red clown nose. But it doesn't matter because the eight senior citizens at Canterbury Ridge, an assisted living and retirement community in Urbana, are ready to get crazy.

"How many are sick of the weather? How many want the snow to melt? How many want spring?" Deb asks energetically, a decibel louder than what you'd expect from someone with a 5-foot frame. "I think we need to take an imaginary trip to Hawaii!"

She passes out plastic leis. "Let's start a warm-up."

"My brain spaced out," says one woman, who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

"I totally understand," says Deb.

Deb proceeds to take the seniors on a cheap flight to the beaches of Hawaii. "You have tender feet because you're not used to walking on the hot sand. ... Instead of saying, 'Ow, ow,



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ow,' we're going to go, 'Ho, ho ho.'" The living room fills with "ho-ho," "ha-ha" and "hee-hee," and soon, the forced act of laughing turns into the real thing.

This is what laughter club – Deb's laughter club – does. It's a concept originated in India by Dr. Madan Kataria that Steve Wilson, psychologist and self-proclaimed joyologist, applied to therapy. He founded World Laughter Tour, an organization that helps reconnect people to "primal laughter," the physical act of laughter that does not require humor. Wilson's group has trained approximately 5,000 people to become certified laughter leaders. Deb is a graduate who spreads laughter's health benefits around Champaign-Urbana, benefits which she says studies suggest may boost the immune system, reduce pain, relax muscles and stimulate the heart.

Deb lives a "rainbow, colorful life." At 54 years of age, she's got energy that could wear out the most hyper kid. Her spunky short, fine white-blond hair sticks straight up at times, and despite her diminutive figure, her loud presence could render a bullhorn useless.

She's blunt and honest, and she says her only vice is swearing. Around her left wrist is a beaded bracelet with the letters JFP – as in Jews For Pork – because she'll do anything for pork.

She's full of stories and over-shares with strangers. When she tells a tale, her hazel eyes widen with excitement, words spill out, her breath shortens, and she erupts into laughter upon delivering the punch line. Deb has all kinds of laughter but most impressive is her infectious belly laugh, loud enough to fill a room.

Born to Shirlee and William Epstein in Chicago, little Debbie was often bullied for her Jewish upbringing or her rotund figure, resulting in self-esteem so low that something as minor as saying "peanut butter and jelly" the wrong way could induce her to tears.

After moving to Skokie, Deb didn't realize the power of laughter until junior high school. No one would hurt her or poke fun if she could make them laugh. Steven Sultanoff, a clinical psychologist based in Irvine, Calif., says that a focus on humor activates three different health experiences: the physical act of laughter, the feeling of mirth where you are emotionally uplifted and wit – the cognitive process of understanding humor.

Deb may not have known the technicalities, but she happily accepted the role of class clown to deflect bullies. Sixth-grade teacher Robert Lyman wrote on her report card: "Debbie is doing a good job. Please tell her to cut down a little on the giggling."

**When I die and get to heaven, God can say, 'When you made my people smile, you made me smile.'**



Her eighth-grade teacher, Frank McCardle, whom Deb loved to torture, wrote: “Too busy talking to her neighbors in class to ever be a *really* serious student,” and “I am going to begin to send her out of class if she does not come around and practice some self-control.” McCardle was true to his word. Deb was often in the hallway as punishment for cracking up everybody in class by being silly or having outbursts.

Even at the University of Illinois, she says, her professors didn’t take her seriously. Deb majored in music education, but her talent was so lacking that she says her oboe professor passed her with a C only if she would consider changing her major. In the end, Deb matriculated with a bachelor’s degree in art education. She married her college beau a month after graduation and three years later gave birth to a daughter, Kate. The marriage fell apart shortly after that, and their divorce was finalized in 1986. At almost 30 years old, Deb was on her own for the first time.

She took classes at the Urbana Adult Education Center and became a certified nursing assistant to make more money. She worked at nursing homes and dabbled in home care. She also dipped below the poverty level and went on food stamps. Deb didn’t purposely employ laughter in her life at the time: “However,” she recalls, “being silly and having a child and enjoying her silliness helped me get through some dark days – and there were many.”

**Monday evening.** Deb is at the TIMES Center, the men’s homeless shelter in downtown Champaign. The building has harsh fluorescent lighting and reeks of unwashed bodies. The men look intimidating. Some have tattoos running up and down their arms; others have piercings. None of this bothers Deb, who is wearing a Mickey Mouse raglan shirt and standing in front of 28 men in the center’s small library. Then again, she’s there voluntarily every week and has been for five years because she believes in the men. She knows how important it is to help people get back on their feet.

“Sometimes we need a little self-reflection,” Deb tells the men. “We need to say, ‘These are my strengths, and these are my weaknesses.’ I don’t know if you look in the mirror every day and go, ‘Hey, you’re brilliant.’ How many do that?”

No one raises his hand.

“That’s what I thought. ... We’re taking a little personality test – I know you’re just thrilled.” She passes out the test. One man asks what enthusiastic means.

“Enthusiastic is me.”

“But you’re a clown,” mumbles R., who goes to every single one of Deb’s classes.

“But still, [enthusiasm is] like, ‘OH BALONEY SANDWICH, THAT IS SO COOL!’”

“That’s animated,” R. replies with a laugh.

“I’m also animated!”



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The men crack up.

“She taught us that we could laugh and cry,” R. says later of Deb, his voice breaking. “She also taught us that we could be strong, ... we didn’t have to settle for second best.

“She’s a gift from God, without a doubt.”

**In 1989**, Deb graduated from a two-year nursing program at Parkland College and began studying laughter as a complementary tool to her medicine. She used to take several props with her on hospital visits – puppets and toys and windup body parts to add comic relief. But she wants to make it clear that she’s not a hospital nurse. She is *sooooo* not a hospital nurse. Too many rules. In the early 1990s, Deb took up home care and long-term care, where she applied laughter and started to make her rounds wearing accouterments like a red clown nose.

One day at a medical facility, a son was visiting his mother who had just checked in as a patient, having broken her knee. When the man saw Deb adorned in fake nose and glasses, he burst out laughing. A year later, they married. That’s how Deb met her “husband-unit,” Darrell J. Hart (they share the same initials). He is soft-spoken, reserved and has subtle humor – the complete opposite of Deb. They take spontaneous road trips together; a magnet she bought for him reads, “Love is ... being

stupid together,” which for them sums up their relationship perfectly.

Behind the giggles, loud outbursts and belly laughter though, Deb has battled depression for most of her life. Winter months are hardest of all for the “queen of therapy.” Two years after marrying Darrell, Deb found out that her dearest friends’ 29-year-old daughter, whom she had helped raise, had been killed in a freak car accident. Surrounding herself with laughter usually helped prevent Deb’s lows from becoming too low, but this time, the death was the tipping point.

Overwhelmed with deep grief, Deb sat in her car at a church parking lot and contemplated suicide. What is the easiest, quickest and least painful way to do this? Pills? How will she get the pills? What combination? But then she remembered a joke:

*“A flood is coming. First, people come up in a car to this guy who’s sitting in his house.*

*“They say, ‘Get in the car; the flood is coming.’*

*“He replies, ‘No, no. God will save me.’*

*“Then, a boat comes up because the floodwaters rose.*

*“No, no. Don’t worry. God will save me.’*

*“Now, he’s on his roof, and helicopters are coming.*

*“Grab the rope; get in the helicopter.’*



*"No, no. God will save me."  
 "He drowns and goes to heaven."  
 "God, what happened? Why didn't you save me?"  
 "You idiot. I sent you a car, a boat and a helicopter."  
 "Not my fault."*

Deb chuckled – what if she had gotten to heaven and asked, *"God, why didn't you save me?"* His answer: *"I sent you a therapist, the opportunity to take medication, and you refused them all."* Her next thought: *I'm going to look stupid because I was offered medication, and I was too proud.* The one thing Deb did not want was to look stupid.

Within three days, she was on antidepressants.

While Deb had studied the healing benefits of laughter, this was the first time she took a dose of her own medicine. Laughter does not cure everything, but amid the tragedies, disappointments and deaths that life brings, it makes every day a little better.

"Laughter is my religion," she says. "It's my code of ethics."

**Sunday morning.** Deb stands behind a podium at the front of a cozy room at Unity Church of Bloomington-Normal. She is empowered to speak to church congregations because she has paid \$25 to be ordained online. Her solemn voice is throaty, and she speaks slowly and quietly. Her sermon is about the powers of imagination, faith and above all, laughter.

"I will laugh at the world," Deb tells the congregation. "So long as I can laugh, I never will be poor. This is one of nature's greatest gifts, and I will waste it no more. I will laugh at the world."

"God blesses you. Amen."

**In February 2008,** after hosting a conference on therapeutic humor, Deb came home completely drained of energy. All she wanted to do was lie on the couch. *Oh my God, what was going on?* she wondered. Deb's fatigue was later attributed to sleep apnea, a sleep disorder where breathing repeatedly starts and stops. After getting an MRI in April, she also found out she had two deeply embedded cavernous malformations in her brain that look like raspberries – "but without the seeds!" – the size of half a thumbnail. The condition involves enlarged and irregularly shaped small blood vessels; if Deb gets a headache, she'll have to rush to the emergency room because the growths could hemorrhage and kill her.

At first, she approached her condition matter-of-factly, Googling "cavernous malformations" and cracking "2-year-old potty humor" jokes as a de-stressor. "I have raspberries in my brain!" or "When I'm looking at you, I'm actually blowing you a raspberry." To Darrell, she'd say, "You like raspberries, don't you? Maybe these are dark chocolate."

When Deb saw her X-rays two months later and noticed one side of her neck did not match the other, she wondered if



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she had an aneurysm or a blockage. Then, it hit her. Should she be planning her funeral? Should she be taking a cruise with her daughter? She and Darrell went to see the doctor again.

“Well, as you can see, you’re really loopy,” Deb recalls the physician saying after looking at her X-rays.

Darrell snorted.

“Hey! I’m not loopy. I’m creatively wired!” said Deb.

It turned out there was no blockage. Deb was so relieved, she cried in the parking lot. But still, the scariest part is the unknown. The cavernous malformations could still bleed out. Darrell and her friends keep her grounded with laughter. She reminds herself to take each day at a time. “Out of spite I play brain games or puzzles, like ‘Find the Word,’” she says, cheekily. “I figured I better do something now to fix my brain.”

**Saturday morning.** Deb lets herself into a ranch-style home and calls out, “It’s Deb the nurse.”

In shuffles D., a retired professor who has powder-blue, watery eyes, rosy cheeks and two tufts of wispy white hair on each side of his head.

“I lost my mind,” he says.

“Well, it’s still in your head!”

“But it vanishes now and then.”

He remembers Deb the nurse, though. He loves drinking weak coffee, laughing to singer-songwriter Tom Lehrer and petting animals. He especially loves bird-watching.

“What are those?” he asks inquisitively, looking out the window.

“Those are mourning doves.”

“Are there evening doves?”

“Yes, they’re called bats,” Deb says, laughing.

D. loves laughing because it helps his mind stay focused on the present so he doesn’t struggle as much with his memory loss. The best compliment D. has ever given Deb came after they passed by a Santa Claus one Christmas during a visit to a mall. Deb said he was the most pitiful, depressing-looking Santa ever. D.’s response: “I think you’d make a wonderful Santa Claus.”

**At any Christmas,** Deb would indeed make a wonderful Santa Claus because she elicits laughter and joy wherever she goes, beginning with the clothes in her “clown closet.” The armoire is crammed with red-checkered pants, petticoats and clown skirts. Among her wigs is a rainbow-colored one that looks like a hybrid of a Mohawk and a mullet. The next drawer holds her clown underwear: Joe Boxer smiley faces, ’60s flower-power, glow-in-the-dark and red-hearted boxers. Next are her multi-colored socks, suspenders, a giant bow tie and silk scarves. And, of course, her red clown nose.

“When I die and get to heaven, God can say, ‘When you made my people smile, you made me smile,’” Deb says.

“That’s how I live my life.”

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