

Laughter: The best medicine

By Kendall Atkins Livick, Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, November 19, 2010 11:45 pm

Circus performers showed the healing element in magic Thursday at Pikeville Medical Center.

Circus “illusinator” and ring master, David DaVinci stumbled upon a medical phenomenon when he was in high school, and Thursday, DaVinci, along with assistants, Jamie Leigh and clown, Dean Kelley, shared this discovery with recovering stroke victims at the hospital.

DaVinci began the presentation by explaining the aftermath of his grandmother’s boat accident the night before her 70th birthday.

“She was with her two sons, and she ended up having a stroke,” he said. “I can still remember walking in (to the hospital) and just being shocked to see my grandmother, who was in perfect health — and we’d go digging for dewey ducks down at the beach — was now hospitalized. So once she got released from the hospital, we realized she hated the therapy side of it. She was right handed, and her right side was affected. She hated to open and close her hand, just to get through the therapy.”

This is where life took a turn for DaVinci and his grandmother.

“What we we started to do, is I would work with her, teaching her magic tricks. So she’d still be doing all the necessary therapy of opening and closing the hand,” he said.

The end result, DaVinci said was a therapy practice called “misdirection,” in which the therapy participant concentrates on what is seemingly an unrelated task, but ends up accomplishing the goals of the therapy session.

“I would teach her to make a pencil float, and the physical dexterity required to actually do this trick, was secretly doing therapy,” he said.

DaVinci then told the participants at the hospital that he would be teaching them magic tricks, just like he did for his grandmother and for other local hospital patients during his teenage years. He taught the stroke survivors how to make a pencil float and how to transfer rubber bands from one



Laughter: The best medicine

Circus performers with Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus visited Pikeville Medical Center to assist recovering stroke victims by teaching them magic tricks as part of their physical therapy. Dean Kelley, the clown, said he was happy to learn new tricks and to see the wonder of magic through participants’ eyes.

finger to another.

The participants were accomplishing their goals of physical therapy, all the while becoming musicians, smiling, laughing and joking with everyone in the room.

One therapy patient, Justina Hess, took a special interest in the magic tricks and the circus performers. Hess, herself, is a former clown. She attended clown school in Florida back in the 90s, and through the performance, was reminded of happy times.

Though she jokingly said she could have done better, she said she really enjoyed Dean the clown. She said she couldn't wait to show the magic tricks to her friends at Carl D. Perkins Vocational Training Center, where she also receives therapy.

Hess said she was jealous of Dean because he has the opportunity to clown as much as he wants. However, she said it is a personal goal of hers to one day be able to clown again. She said the reason she was so passionate about this activity, was because it allowed her "to make kids happy." In fact, she said she got a thrill out of inspiring laughter in people of all ages.

Hess said laughter has been a large part of her healing process.

"Outlook is important," she said, explaining how a pleasant attitude can go a long way.

Her mother, Jan Kinney said it has been Hess's cheerful disposition that has aided in her recovery.

"She's always laughed. Since she had her stroke, after the first initial couple weeks, she got into laughing — and she cried for a while — but now it's mostly all laughter," Kinney said.

DaVinci said seeing all the laughing and knowing the therapeutic techniques are working for patients is a wonderful feeling.

"That's what makes it rewarding, and it's similar in our shows," he said. "We're able to take people away from their ordinary life and take them to this area of suspended belief, where they aren't thinking about their issues."

He said the best part of the therapy, is that it allows the patients to feel that they accomplished something great.

"When they open their hand, and that rubber band jumps for the first time, they totally forget that they're in therapy," he said. "All their problems are gone, and they just had a win. When's the last time they had a win? If you open your hand, and you close it, and it hurts, that's not successful for them. But to be able to magically make a pencil float or make these rubber bands change places, it's just this reward, and to see that, is awesome."

Jamie Leigh said the togetherness aspect also played a big part in the fun atmosphere.

"They're all there to just kind of bump each other up and learn, and all the nurses are even getting

into it,” Leigh said. “If it’s so fun that they forget about the pain, I mean that is amazing, and we’ve really done our jobs.”

Even the clown, Dean Kelley learned some new tricks.

“Every single person was trying it. I mean they were trying hard, and everybody was doing it,” he said. “That was the coolest part to see.”

The performers said the activities they did with the therapy patients were a few examples of the performance principles they apply in the circus; and now the therapy patients are putting on their own magic shows for friends and family.

For a circus schedule, visit www.eastkyexpo.com.