

Dan Roberts Clowns Around Jakarta

If laughter is the best medicine then those living in poverty and crisis situations throughout the world are in need of a double dose. As a volunteer member of Clowns Without Borders, Dan Roberts ('02), returned to Jakarta to encourage humor and laughter in the city's poorest neighborhoods through performances as well as workshops with children and educators and leave 'no child without a smile.' Dan wrote to us by email before he arrived in Indonesia to explain his goals as a clown.

What are your plans in Jakarta as a Clown Without Borders?

I'm planning to bring the joy and excitement of circus to communities of children effected by poverty. The point is to allow these kids to be kids. So often, in poor or homeless communities, the children are forced to grow up, act tough, go to work, etc. at such a young age. I want to give them a place where they can come to laugh and goof around, as well as learn beneficial circus skills that will help them in different facets of their lives.

What and where will you be teaching and clowning?

I will be performing at different locations for schools and groups of children, sharing my one man, 30-minute show. Giving kids a chance to laugh, let loose, enjoy an afternoon and maybe inspire them to start working and learning with the project.

I will also be teaching the JIS kids in Tom Schulz's IB Theater class about clowning and circus. It will be valuable to their acting education to learn clown. (Not the kind of ringling/birthday clown with big rainbow wigs and jumbo unitards). I studied European clown techniques at my acting conservatory and am very excited to pass this knowledge off to other acting students.

The JIS kids will also learn circus, so they can accompany me in teaching the younger kids of the project. My goal is to set up a group of students, part from the One More Chance (OMC) house, part from JIS, and create a performance ensemble of types. These will be the more advanced students in circus and clown and they will learn together, train together, perform together, fail together and succeed together. In my experience, this is a wonderful way to bond students together in a real, concrete way. It won't be like the ex-patriot kids are just helping out the Indonesian kids. They will be equals and they will learn to trust each other and work together in ways crossing cultural boundaries that they may have not experienced before.

I would also like to teach some of the JIS kids about clown care (hospital clowning). This is a very delicate and difficult skill that I myself am still honing and working out. We'll play it by ear and see how things go. Ideally, I'd like to have the JIS kids start clowning at hospitals with me. If some of them "get it" then once I leave they'll be able to continue giving this care to kids, who will be so appreciative of their kindness.

The following is from Dan's blog, www.circusindonesia.blogspot.com when he first came to Jakarta and began his good work.

(February 21, 2008)

I woke early and headed north to a small fishing village called, Cilincing on the north shore of Jakarta. After a three-hour car ride through the center of Jakarta's *macet* (traffic!), we arrived to find the village is flooded and in danger of being swept into the ocean because of poor drainage systems and recent high waves. When we arrived, we were first greeted with a strong aroma of fish. There were lines of fish-drying tables, surrounded by half a meter of water from the flooding. We went to where I'd be performing and teaching and I was asked if it was sufficient. It was the living room of someone's house. The ceiling was possibly three meters high and the floor space was barely enough to fit a couch, coffee table and a TV. Of course, the room was cleared for our arrival.



Dan with some JIS and OMC students.

I had planned to use a rolling globe in my show and juggle five rings, impossible given the ceiling height, so I quickly changed plans and went back to the car to get different gear. The wind had picked up and ocean waves were splashing between the housing structures. Ducking underneath tin scrap metal rooftops and bamboo poles holding the structures together, we wended through the labyrinth of homes. The *bapak* (elder male) of the village brought a few teenage boys to help carry things back. There was too much water on the ground to wear my clown shoes, so I slipped on my clown pants over my shorts, pulled my hair into a upwards facing 'fountain tail' and glued on my clown nose. As soon as I had transformed into a *badut* (clown), people were much friendlier. I was no longer greeted with a sarcastic "hello mister," but instead was greeted with one of two reactions. Either pointing fingers and the comment, "hidung badut!" (clown nose) or a hysterical pointing, screaming and laughing. After a few minutes goofing around with the adults who were scattered throughout the front of the *kampung* (village), we made our entrance back into the crowded array of homes. All the kids were waiting in the room and talking with Mita, a member of Yayasan Emmanuel and the coordinator of youth activities, who had escorted me. On my way back to the children, a large crowd gathered. They were excited to see a clown walking through the *kampung* or perhaps they just wanted to know what this tall foreigner with a red nose was doing there.



The children of Cilincing having a good time while forgetting their problems, if only for a while.

With 30 kids, teenagers and adults all trying to see what was going on, the room was packed from wall to wall. I started by passing out clown noses to the kids. Once the kids all had noses, the parents and teenagers started asking for noses as well. I told everyone that I had plenty of noses and the only thing they had to do to get one, was to wear it. And they all did! I gave the *bapak* a special nose that had a string on it and he started out the clown show by pretending that he didn't know how to put it on. The kids excitedly encouraged him to put it on the correct way and after a few minutes of the nose being an eye patch, a hat or a chin guard, he finally got it on his nose. I performed an adjusted version of my show, speaking only in Indonesian, which was exciting for me. Everyone loved the show, laughed and cheered wildly for my tricks, the kids I brought on stage and, of course, the *bapak*, who spent the whole show shadowing my clowning.

After the show, I brought out some flower sticks to teach the kids. There was only enough room for about 10 kids to play at one time, so I talked to the kids about sharing and explained that everyone would get a turn. The kids that had flower sticks made a circle in the middle of the room and I ran them through some of the instructions on how to use them. After everyone had a chance to try, I collected them all and passed out spinning plates. After an hour or so of working with the kids, it was time to pack up all the stuff and leave. Soaked in sweat, with a smile glued from ear to ear, I walked out to the front of the village and said goodbye. The kids were all very excited that I'll be returning soon and so am I.

Next, I'll begin teaching after school at a JIS-sponsored house for homeless boys that was built years ago, when I was at JIS, called the One More Chance house. We'll also have the first day of our JIS Circus Club after school. Then back to Cilincing. I'll also spend a morning a week at a cancer hospital clowning for the youth and in the afternoon will be leading the JIS/OMC House Circus integration program. Soon I'll also be teaching a group of children from a village called Rawamangun once a week.

I've started working with the JIS IB Theater students, teaching them the fundamentals of clown. Some of these students will begin coming with me into the community to perform and teach workshops. The JIS students are eager to learn and excited to get involved. Two students in particular are going to begin participating soon after school and are using their participation with this project as part of their IB curriculum.

Dan at the Cilincing kampung with a willing bapak who found his inner clown.



For more information on Dan and CWB, please log on to www.clownswithoutborders.org. Then if you'd like to make a donation, click the scrolling bar 'Help Us' and write Indonesia Expedition in the 'purpose' line.