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HERE'S WALDO! Minister clown has message, will travel

by Richard G. Biever, associate editor

He makes his living on the road. Going here, being there. Rummage through his travel case and you'd find a road map, a Bible, a few plungers to juggle and maybe a balloon bunny.

Waldo the clown, also known as Steve Walden, has been doing what he does since 1982. For the many church groups who keep Waldo constantly on the roads of six states, his is a ministry that brings fun and smiles to teachings of the Bible and God's love.

For private parties, festivals, corporate events and company picnics, Waldo pulls positive messages from his entertaining bag of tricks for young and old. That's Waldo's trademark -- "always a positive message."

"I feel I have an obligation as a clown to leave people with something that will help them personally, . . . leave them with something not just for the moment."

Waldo's ministry

The obligation Walden said he feels to teach positive messages comes from his experiences as an ordained minister.

Walden graduated from Lincoln Christian College, located in Lincoln, Illinois, in 1981. He and his wife, Cheryl, moved to Indiana when he became youth minister of a 140 member Christian Church in Colfax, Indiana, a small town in southwestern Clinton County.

As a kid growing up in Decatur, Illinois, Walden said he had never considered clowning. But shortly after starting at Colfax, he saw a photo in a magazine of a minister who used clowning from the pulpit.

Always looking for a new way to reach the youngsters of Colfax, Walden turned to clowning as an additional tool in his youth ministry.



From there, the seed for his own clowning ministry was planted. Clowning came easy to Walden. Waldo was born.

Walden took a clowning class in Indianapolis to get down some basics, and turned to books. Lots of books. He explored deeper into clowning by teaching himself juggling, balloon sculpturing and magic routines. He found he could combine these visual elements to teach Biblical messages.

He also decided to take Waldo on the road by sending out flyers to 25-30 other churches in a 30-mile radius. The response was positive. Waldo's circle of churches grew.

In 1984, Walden became youth minister at the New Hope Christian Church outside of Whitestown, Indiana. The position included a provision allowing him one Sunday evening a month for Waldo's traveling clown ministry. It was quite a concession, since Sunday evenings are prime for youth ministries. His family is still active in the church.

Other denominations, both Protestant and Catholic, called on Waldo, too. He taught Bible basics like God's love and the promises of Jesus. "These things are universal," he said.

As his clowning ministry grew, Walden realized he had to make a decision: remain as a located youth minister and scale back as Waldo, or turn to Waldo full time. He could juggle plungers, but not two ministries.

In 1989, he tested the waters with mailings, and then plunged full time into free-lance clowning. It was a risk, he said, especially since the family included not just him and Cheryl anymore, but also a daughter, Lisa, who at the time was 6.

But Cheryl was supportive. "She's put up with a lot," he said. "She did not marry a clown. She married somebody who was going to have a regular paycheck coming in. Now she's married to someone . . . singing for his supper. It's kind of scary from one month to the next. There's a big step of faith in there."

Going full time meant he also had to expand Waldo's big top beyond state lines. Today he mails flyers to nearly 1000 churches in six states. Besides Indiana travels, he's traveled to Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, Michigan and Ohio as Waldo. "I never dreamed it would get to this point," he said.

Though 90 percent of his appearances are for church-related groups, he also had to join the secular clowning circuit that has included promotions for an Indianapolis radio station, corporate picnics, festivals, schools, daycare centers, amusement parks and private parties. Waldo's rates are generally based on the patron: churches by congregation size; private parties by set rate; corporations are usually by the hour.

Waldo just finished an appearance at the end of January at Kidsfest, a giant weekend children's convention at the Hoosier Dome that combined family fun with culture, art and education.

Kidsfest was a feather duster (another of Waldo's favorite props) in his cap because it shares Waldo's philosophy of education that isn't featherweight, even in the non-religious programs. Waldo still imparts educational messages of self-esteem, respect of others and friendship in every program he does. Parents, who don't expect it when they hire a clown for a party, are pleasantly surprised.

"I offer a unique way to use clowning. I don't just do things for the sake of doing them. I always tie them in with some kind of message. If you can do it and not lose any entertainment value, then why not teach while you entertain?"

Waldo averages four to five shows a week throughout the year. During the busy months, May through October, he may do several shows a day with Vacation Bible Schools, church camps, youth groups and summer picnics.

A weekend last month was typical. Waldo drove to a birthday party for a 7-year-old in Indianapolis Saturday morning. That evening, he surprised a 50-year-old birthday girl in Brownsburg. Sunday morning he performed for a church youth group in Indianapolis, then went to Anderson for a 1-year-old's birthday party.

The snowy weekend before, he had a church group Sunday morning in Indianapolis and a party in eastern Illinois that afternoon.

One weekend he drove 200 miles to Illinois for a Saturday show. He then drove back to his home south of Lebanon, arriving around 2 a.m. Sunday. After just several hours of rest, he got up and drove 350 miles to a show in eastern Ohio.

Waldo's vagabond ministry may seem more suited to the "tramp" clown than the "white-face" clown that he is. And Walden admits there are trade-offs by not being a located minister. But for the most part, Waldo has his pie in the face, and eats it too.

"The ministry I have as Waldo allows me to tap strictly into the good stuff. I get to have fun with kids and

adults of all ages. I get to teach and share Christ in a creative, memorable way." He sees people at their best, and doesn't get caught up in church politics and problems. He also gets to share his talents with many people.



Being a clown

The more Walden has taught others as Waldo, the more Waldo has taught Walden about himself.

When children ask Waldo how old he is, Waldo tells them -- 12. That's when Waldo first appeared. "Thirteen years ago when I looked in the mirror, I didn't look this good," Waldo says. And Walden really means it.

"I'm at my best when I try to think more like Waldo. Waldo never loses his temper. Waldo never does anything that might hurt someone's feelings. Waldo makes me more aware of some things I should do as Steve, but sometimes don't."

Clowning, he said, is one of the best ways to discover the inner self, what makes you tick. "A clown is not just someone who puts on makeup and a funny outfit. A clown is somebody who has turned himself inside out so that other people can see what that inner self looks like."

To the casual clown observer, that statement may seem nonsensical, what with the makeup and all. Walden said the makeup is no Halloween mask. Used correctly, the clown's makeup and costume accentuates a person's natural features. It's a way of laughing at himself or herself and exploring new facets.

Walden christened himself Waldo, for instance, not just because it was an obvious takeoff of his name. When he was a child, the kids on the playground who took great pleasure in twisting other people's names called him "Waldo" to make fun of him. By choosing that name, Walden has turned the tables.

With the makeup and the new character, a clown can be free to exhibit feelings inside that normally the person may be too shy to reveal or keep concealed for fear of becoming vulnerable to others. "Waldo takes all the risks when we are in front of a group," said Walden.

Most importantly, though, being a clown is learning to open the heart and to share with others.

"If you just put on the makeup and costume, you won't be perceived as a clown. Clowning comes from the inside."

He said the most dreaded thing that can happen to someone in grease paint is for a child to peer into the eyes and say, "You're not a real clown."

From the eyes of the children looking into Waldo's eyes, you can see Waldo's a real clown. Waldo is more animated than Walden. He uses bigger gestures and voice inflections. All make Waldo seem larger than Walden. In a way, Waldo is larger than life.

The bright colors make clowns look bigger, necessary especially in a circus where the colors are used to carry expressions some distance.

Waldo has a distinct walk Walden said he cannot do when he's not in makeup. That's probably a good thing. Waldo does a lot of pacing that would drive people nuts if he did it as Steve, he said.

"The very moment I finish dressing (as Waldo), I am no longer Steve. The walk automatically kicks in"

A cardinal sin of clowning is to let other people see the clown out of character. It's unprofessional and causes a clown to lose credibility. By assuming Waldo's character immediately, he said it's less likely to happen. "I don't want to slip back and forth from Steve to Waldo."

It's funny that Walden does speak of Waldo in third person, and the two of them in second. "I'll talk about 'we', 'we will be there.' I'm not schizophrenic. I realize the difference. But I think of Waldo as a separate person."

Still, "the two of us are getting closer and closer," he added.

Clown missionary

Walden is something of a disciple for clowning. In the churches he promotes clowning as a way to reach out to people in need and creatively teach the Bible. In the 4-H program, he promotes clowning as a way youngsters can develop self-expression, self-esteem, talents and imagination.

"Clowning is a way to bring enjoyment to other people. Anytime you can do something to make a child smile or give you a hug, it is a great feeling. You did it. You're responsible for causing happiness to someone else. What a great self-esteem builder."

Walden said he has shared the tools of clowning with dozens of new and established clown ministries throughout Indiana and neighboring states, and has helped 4-H clown projects in several counties. Both clowning groups are technically approached the same way, but with different objectives and lessons.

Classes begin with lessons on makeup and costuming and how to act like a clown. Skills like juggling and magic and clown skits are added. The new clowns then head out to hospitals and nursing homes to raise smiles.

Afterward, the clowns regroup to discuss the experience and how to better develop their clown characters.

"Your most important role as a clown," Walden said, "is to show love and concern to those around you."

That's a rule brought home to Waldo early in his career. It came not from a child, but from a lonely elderly woman in a nursing home.

During a visit with a clown ministry from Lafayette, Waldo stopped in the woman's room.

She showed him pictures of her children and grandchildren. Though they lived nearby, she said they never came to visit. And she began to cry.

Waldo didn't say a word, but held her hand. After ten minutes, he said, "she looked at me and said, 'thank you so much for coming in and being with me and talking with me.'" And she smiled.

"I got a smile out of her. That was my clowning for that lady. I didn't have to juggle. I didn't have to do tricks or entertain. All I had to do was be there for her."

Clowning doesn't require juggling, or balloons or slight of hand. It begins with just a hand for someone to hold and someone to show that they care. That's the essence of Waldo.

