That's Life

The Real Patch Adams Clowns Around at Hospital Fundraiser



Janet Winikoff/The Acorn

LARGER THAN LIFE: Hunter "Patch" Adams, whose life was the basis for the hit movie, *Patch Adams*, starring Robin Williams, visited Encino-Tarzana Hospital last week. The unconventional doctor founded the Gesundheit Institute, which promotes healing through humor, art and community spirit.

By Janet Winikoff
Acorn Staff Writer

His waist-length gray hair was pulled back in a pony tail. There was a blue streak running down one side of his scalp. He sported a handlebar mustache and wore a Halloween print shirt, long magenta skirt, and an earring that consisted of a dangling fork. For over an hour, he talked about changing the nation's health care system and encouraged patients and doctors to develop a peer relationship. The audience at Encino-Tarzana Hospital hung on every word.

The man also wants to design a "community whoopee cushion."

While he figures the giant whoopee cushion would take ten people to make it work, "What better way is there to get 10 people to work together?" asked Hunter "Patch" Adams.

Adams, the unconventional doctor whose unorthodox methods of caring for patients were portrayed in the hit movie *Patch Adams*, was in the area last Thursday evening in conjunction with a benefit for the Encino-Tarzana Hospital Community Foundation, which provides services and funding to improve the health and lives of people in the community.

Caring for community members seems to be Adams' forte. The 53-year-old West Virginia resident, who claims he lives on $400 a month, is the founder of the Gesundheit Institute. The institute, which encourages healing through the use of humor, art and community spirit, is as unorthodox as its creator. Patients, physicians and their families all live at the facility, which offers treatments that include everything from acupuncture to shamanism. Since its inception, the institute reportedly has treated more than 15,000 people whom Adams believes would have been turned away by most health care providers, usually because they lack money or adequate health insurance.

Between reciting long stanzas of love poetry during last week's local appearance, Adams stressed that physicians should consider the quality of life to be as important as saving a life.

"If a person's life stinks, and you cut out a tumor and give that person 10 more years to live, you have a patient that now only has 10 more stinky years," he said. Adams urged physicians to embrace death as they do life, pointing to the upbeat behavior which he said he exhibits with terminally ill patients. "If you want a great last week (of life), I'm your man," he said.

To the surprise of many doctors in the audience, Adams said he prides himself on having never handled any type of insurance form. He also has never carried malpractice insurance. "No insurance company cares about people, so we don't care about insurance companies," Adams said with defiance, adding, "When doctors carry malpractice insurance they are telling patients 'I'm afraid of you and I don't trust you.'"

"If you were injured or died, and you don't have health or life insurance, wouldn't you be concerned about your children?" asked one worried guest.

"Do you have any friends that you would trust with your children?" retorted Adams. "That's the kind of insurance I want. I want an insurance company called 'friends.'"

Again surprising the audience, Adams revealed that he takes 3-4 hours to interview each new patient. Calling himself the "Sherlock Holmes" of house calls, Adams said he also insists on searching every closet and drawer in a patient's home. "I want to know every secret that you are afraid to reveal. What's the point of being your doctor if I don't know everything about you?" he asked the audience.

One audience member stood up and announced that he was a former medical school classmate of Patch's. "Joe, is that you?" Adams called out to a face in the crowd.

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Clowning Around is Patch's Trademark



Janet Winikoff/The Acorn

PATCH ADAMS is unconventional right down to his attire. During recent local visit he wore a Halloween print shirt, long magenta skirt and a dangling fork earring - all that in addition to his blue-streaked hair.

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"While the rest of us were struggling in medical school ... I'm not sure what Patch was doing," "Joe" said, recalling that his classmate had a photographic memory. "Everything that he knew about medicine he wrote down in a simple, 60-page notebook."

Responding to the curiosity of the audience, Adams spoke briefly about his background. "Obviously, medical school didn't do this to you," said one physician, prompting Adams' medical school classmate to yell out, "He was this way in medical school. He's always been this way ... really for life."

While he describes *Patch Adams* as a "fluffy" version of his life, Adams acknowledged that the film does portray many truthful incidents, including the tragic death of his best friend in medical school, who was murdered by one of the patients they were trying to treat.

Adams also credits the film with helping him obtain funding for the construction of a new hospital facility. He told the audience that shortly after the movie's release he was approached by supporters who gave the Gesundheit Institute $12.5 million dollars to build a new 40-bed rural community hospital. While showing slides of the proposed facility, Adams explained that the exteriors of the buildings are designed to resemble various body parts. The hospital will also include a theater, a fine arts complex ... and a number of secret passages.

"The hospital will be funny to look at and funny to be in," Adams said, proclaiming, "It will be the first silly hospital in history."

While his demeanor seemed a bit rough around the edges and while his treatment methods may be questionable, Adams' basic message of making humor an important part of medical treatment is well taken.

At the conclusion of the evening - after inviting guests onstage to moon the audience with him - Adams mentioned that anyone interested in working for free could hop onboard as a staffmember of the Gesundheit Institute. "It doesn't matter if you have a degree or not, this hospital is for anyone who wants an experience in giving. At our institute, we teach Friendship 101," he said.

While a few members of the audience may have been interested in Adams' job offer, nobody took him up on the mooning idea.

Discover Fun and Learning at National Library Week Celebration

Some two-thirds of Americans say the library is where they go to get books, use computers and find other resources they need in the information age, according to a recent poll. In recognition of the role National Library Week, April 11-17. The American Library Association offers the following tips on how your family can best utilize the many resources available to them at their local library.

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