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Jester makes hospital his mirth ward

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It's not hard to pick out Alan Agins, Ph.D., in the lobby of University of Virginia Hospital — he's the one in the clown nose.

In fact, in a world dominated by white lab coats and green surgical scrubs, he's dressed in a loud tie, mismatched sneakers and a huge floppy hat.

And he's juggling.

Puzzled patients glance up from their old magazines, smiling hesitantly, as if they're not sure whether it's OK to be amused in a hospital.

Since September, Agins, a trained pharmacologist and one-time cancer researcher, has been practicing a different kind of medicine at UVa — humor.

A few times a week, he wanders through the

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hospital, trying to bring patients, family and staff members a little relief from their worries.

"I got carte blanche (from the hospital administrators) after I proved I wasn't going to hurt anybody ... no open flames or sharp objects," he says, carefully juggling three brightly colored balls.

He turns sharply to an observer. "Know how

to juggle? Want to?"

He launches into a lesson — first with silk scarves, then moving up to hard rubber balls.

He attracts lots of attention. A toddler in his mother's arms stares in amazement as Agins sticks a kazoo in his mouth and hums tunelessly. "Don't cry," he says as the child's face suddenly darkens.

"He just doesn't know what to make of it," his mother explains.

"A lot of people don't," Agins says, apparently unoffended. He plucks the kazoo out of his mouth and bounces off in search of a more receptive audience.

In everyday life, Agins is an assistant professor at the UVa School of Nursing. He spent most of his career teaching pharmacology and performing clinical research at hospitals in the

See JESTER, Page A6



Progress photo by Chris McKenney

Dr. Alan Agins performs sleight of hand for Paige Shiflett of Waynesboro in the pediatric clinic at University of Virginia Hospital.

Jester

Continued From Page A1

Boston area.

A few years ago, he decided to take his sense of humor and self-taught juggling skills into Boston-area nursing homes to entertain patients during the holidays. When he moved to Central Virginia last summer, he volunteered his skills at UVa.

"Of course, in some quarters there's some trepidation when something new is tried, so we started a little gingerly," said Liz Courain, director of the hospital's Volunteer Services, "but it's unfolded beautifully."

Humor has long been recognized as a way to soothe pain and ease minds, Agins said, but the medical profession, like much of society, has forgotten to laugh.

Even when he's not in front of an audience, Agins is a performer. His hands flash around in broad, open gestures and his eyes twinkle as he talks.

When he's strolling through the hospital, he's all show. Walking into the pediatric clinic, he singles out a few bored-looking children and starts to work.

He pulls a handkerchief out of his apparently empty hand. He pulls a paper chain out of the handkerchief. He turns an ordinary wad of crepe paper into a hat, one of his favorite tricks.

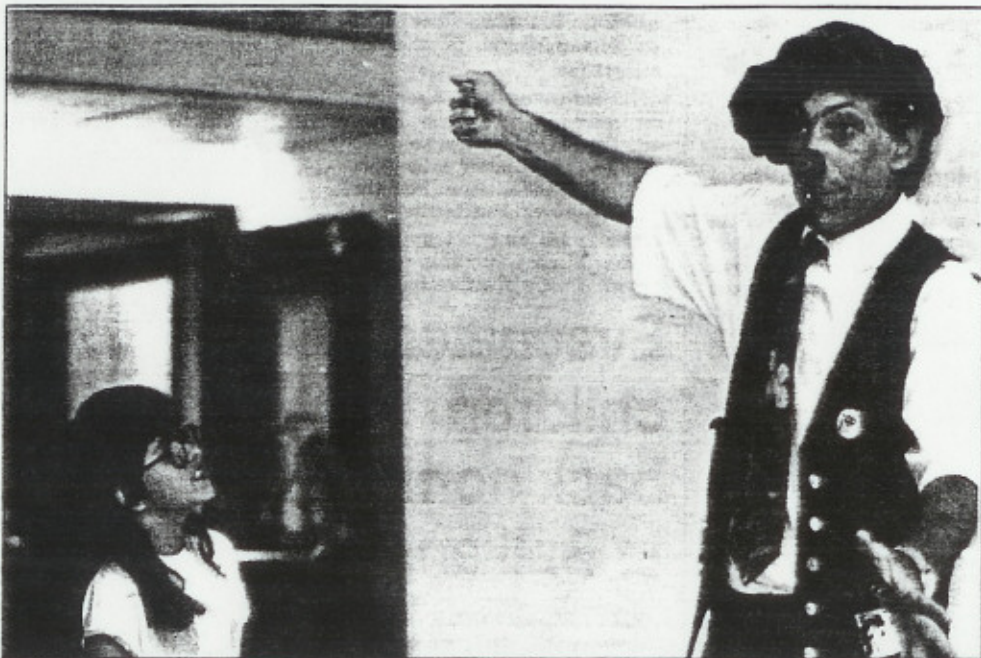
"Oh, that's neat," says 9-year-old Niki Thompson, warming up to the unexpected show. "I like clowns anyway," she explains, settling the hat on her head.

Two-year-old Clinton Goodwin makes friends more quickly. One unidentifiable balloon animal and he's hooked.

His mother, Kim, has trouble wresting him away from Agins' leg.

"I find the parents of the kids like to see their kids entertained," Agins said.

Adult patients need a lift just as



Progress photo by Chris McKenney

What's up, Doc? Niki Thompson, 9, stands by to assist Agins with one of his many magic tricks.

much as kids do, he said. They just sit and "all this time they've got their health problems on their minds."

But sometimes people just don't want to be entertained. Part of the skill of being an entertainer in a hospital is reading how people will react. "I don't throw myself in people's faces," he said.

Eventually, with a little understanding and gentle prodding, Agins said, even the most depressed and seriously withdrawn people will smile a bit.

Agins' style comes directly from vaudeville. When he started out in the nursing homes near Boston, he found the residents didn't care about the latest trends in stand-up comedy, but they remembered the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges and vaudeville stage shows.

Agins soon found that the quick visual tricks work just as well with

younger generations.

"Everybody remembers physical comedy. ... They can't remember verbal jokes more than a couple of days," he said.

"I don't do a lot of clown shtick," he said, leaning across the table, suddenly serious. He calls himself a modern jester.

"I don't do clown makeup. ... Makeup puts too much of a distance between you," he said, putting his palm up at arm's length from his face.

Agins tries to engage people in conversation. Wandering down a hall in the pediatric clinic, he comes upon a room with a young girl hooked up to an intimidating monitor. She looks drawn and her hair is thin. After a few tricks, she begins to smile and open up a little. They talk about summer vacation, and he discovers she's headed for Disney World.

"What'd you do, win the Super Bowl?" he jokes.

"Well," he says, flopping down with a huff on a chair next to her and crossing his legs. "The Magic Kingdom is cool wherever you go."

After a few minutes, the girl is laughing with Agins. She looks more relaxed.

He moves on to the cafeteria to get a drink. On the way, he bounds around the hallway, greeting staff members and visitors, often commenting on their clothing, particularly anything bright.

Finally, he sinks wearily into a chair. "It takes a lot of energy," he confesses. "I can do it for about two hours at a time, because each person you run into, you've got to be fresh and new and upbeat."

After a rest, he moves back toward the lobby, where he's last spotted juggling for a new crew of puzzled visitors.