

Laughing it off: Maria's clowns bring back the smile

By Anna Chernyakhovskaya

UNICEF's work is not normally a laughing matter. But in the Russian Federation, UNICEF is helping both seriously ill youngsters and old people have a good chuckle and in the process, bringing some much-needed happiness and healing into their lives.

The conduit in this case is 'Maria's Children', a Moscow-based NGO founded by Maria Yeliseeva. The 38-year-old artist is devoted to creating mirth, mainly through the use of clowns but not those from the circus. She trains her very own group, who are none other than children from orphanages to whom she provides a nurturing and caring environment.

Maria started her venture 10 years ago, in a small basement studio where she welcomed in and taught children from different orphanages about the wonders of art and being a clown. For several years, she ran things on a voluntary basis, with friends donating supplies such as crayons, water colours and paper. Three years later, realizing that her activities with orphaned children were more than just a hobby, Maria registered her work as an NGO.

This year, UNICEF and Rosbank, one of Russia's largest commercial banks, are providing US\$5,000 to 'Maria's Children' as part of their joint New Day programme. Set up in 1999, the programme has supported 123 small-scale projects covering more than 50 Russian regions. 'Maria's Children', which delivers wide-ranging benefits to children on a razor-thin budget, is just the kind of organization that UNICEF is eager to build up. It was selected precisely because it can make a small financial investment go a very long way.

For the big picture, UNICEF's support to the NGO is helping to spread some double doses of delight: children who normally don't have much to smile about are cheering up the sad and the sick simply by acting as clowns, and in the process, are being tremendously uplifted themselves. The end result is a high voltage emotional charge that is overwhelmingly life-affirming for everyone, givers and receivers alike.

"I learned how to juggle," Sasha, 12, proudly explains. "The lessons were provided by a real professional from the Moscow circus for free. I invented a hamburger costume. I performed in an orphanage, a children's hospital and once on the street. It's lots of fun when people smile at you and start laughing."

Sasha lost his father four years ago and he hasn't seen his mother since she abandoned the family some time before that. With his father's death, Sasha and his seven siblings were forced to leave home in the outskirts of Moscow and live in different orphanages. As the youngest sibling, his transfer to orphanage number 80 came as a hard blow.

But by participating in 'Maria's Children' activities, Sasha has found a reason to smile. "My life completely changed when I met Maria and started visiting the studio! One of my

classmates went there first and I started going to the studio in 2000. I like drawing there and clowning is also great fun,” he says.

“Clowning provides a person with a fantastic experience,” says Maria. “It has opened up a new world for the children.”

Learning to be a clown is a creative process that helps to develop the imaginative faculties of the children. It is all about inventing, be it a costume, ways of applying the special make-up, or different funny tricks, and then having the courage to present it all to an audience.

For the boys and girls brought in by Maria, the studio is a safe haven, a secure place where love, understanding and support are the order of the day – a contrast to the often harsh and cold world of adults and institutions. As friendships developed, Maria started to bring studio regulars to her tiny apartment for the weekends and take them on walking trips in the summer and spring. For all this, she has had the firm backing of her husband and four daughters, who are used to sharing their lives with a panoply of youngsters.

“These children are very much stressed and closed off. As a result of their childhood traumas, most of them don’t see their personal worth. They don’t think they could be of any interest to strangers,” says Maria. “Being a clown, they attempt to entertain other children. It gives them the unique opportunity to touch other children while at the same time opening up to their own feelings, realizing their own personal value.”

Maria caught on to the clown act after an encounter with Patch Adams, an American family doctor who frequently visited Russia and whose philosophy is to heal illness with laughter. He and a group of friends had been performing as clowns for 13 years for children with cancer and cerebral palsy and other diseases, as well as in old-age homes. They noticed that they didn’t need to speak Russian to be understood; a good act and a big smile were all the tools needed.

Maria followed in the footsteps of Patch, bravely joined by her charges. Starting out in Moscow’s Red Square, they then moved onto cancer hospitals and orphanages. That’s when the little ‘clowns’ realized that their life was not doomed after all and that they could help others in even tougher situations.

The funds that UNICEF and Rosbank are contributing to ‘Maria’s Children’ this year are earmarked for costume materials and travelling expenses, allowing the NGO to take its trademark entertainment well beyond the borders of Moscow. Recently, thanks to those funds, a group of 40 kids involved with the NGO were bussed to Vladimir, a town around 260 kilometres from Moscow, where they not only performed but taught other kids the tricks of the clown trade so they in turn could spread some gaiety and joy around.

UNICEF, through its child protection programme, is promoting alternative solutions to institutional care in Russia as part of an overall mission to expand child rights consciousness among the public and policy makers. But since a good many children

are still in orphanages, the point is to nurture them, emotionally and physically, to be able to lead fully productive lives, which is where UNICEF's support to 'Maria's Children' comes in.

It may not be a traditional cure, but laughter is increasingly recognized for its therapeutic effects. Just ask Sasha. He knows it works.