

Men of St. Patrick clown around to spread their faith

By **Yadira Betances**
Staff Writer

LAWRENCE — When John E. Cuddy looks in the mirror, he sees a reflection of his father, Jim.

And it is not just the eyes and smile that are the same.

With a framed photograph of his late father by his side, Cuddy, 44, uses white makeup to exaggerate his mouth, black makeup to draw on a beard and paints his nose red to accentuate it.

As a member of the Men of St. Patrick, Cuddy dresses as a clown in a captain's coat and hat, much like the costume his father first donned 40 years ago.

"This is to honor him and continue the tradition," Cuddy said.

Cuddy is one of more than 30 members of the Men of St. Patrick Emmett Kelley Clown group, who march in parades and visit nursing homes spreading cheer in the name of Christ.

The men base their characters on Emmett Kelley, a renowned tramp clown, known for his portrayal of "Weary Willy," a down on his luck guy who never gave up. A few of them dress up as hobos, wearing ripped jeans, overcoats and painted sneakers, and holding a sack.

Cuddy, Joe E. Viel, Sean B. Reardon and Joe R. Ratte, all of Lawrence, revived the clown troupe in 2002, many years after the church's original clown group, of which Cuddy's dad was a member, had disbanded.

"The goal is going out and having fun," said Reardon, president of the Men of St. Patrick, which has members from Methuen and Lawrence and the New Hampshire towns of Salem, Hampstead and Londonderry.

"Being a clown is more than wearing pancake makeup and a silly costume," Viel said. "It's the personality that you bring. Once you get into it, it's a whole different atmosphere."

Ratte agreed.

"I'm the least person to do this because I don't like being in the spotlight," Ratte said. "I

just do it for the community, to help out in the group and participate in the parades."

Cuddy tries to be as true to his father's character as he can. He wears a black jacket embellished with large square patches in green, orange and white throughout and a large shamrock on the back. He sports shoulder ornaments, toy medals on his lapels and buttons that read, "Kiss Me I'm Irish" and "Santa Please Stop Here."

He pieced together purple, green and gold beads which he wears around his neck. He completes the outfit with a captain's hat decorated with a skull and crossbones.

While the members' wives help with makeup, some of their children dress up as clowns. Most of the boys are hobos and the girls wear red circles on their cheeks and cheerleading uniforms or other outfits.

The troupe marches in St. Patrick Day's parades here and in South Boston, which is considered the second largest parade in the country.

"The city parade is the root of who we are," Viel said. "Along the route we see people we know and they recognize us even though we're in costume. Seeing the nuns, priests and students wave at us as we go by the parish, that's what it's all about."

While marching in a parade, the clowns play tambourines and kazoos, and throw candy and colorful beads to the crowd.

But the Men of St. Patrick do more than clown around. Since 2002, they have helped buy a van for the church, and given presents to kids at the Boys & Girls Club of Lawrence.

They support the parish's Scout troop and cheerleading squad, award two scholarships a year to students going onto Catholic high school, and last year paid to have a new kitchen built in the parish school.

Their generosity is known outside St. Patrick parish, too.

The clown troupe visits residents at Sun Bridge Colonial Heights nursing home in Lawrence at Christmastime and hands out boxes of chocolates.

"They're fantastic," said Terri Mercier, activities director at Sun Bridge. "They go into every room and sing to every resident an individual song. They hold the resident's hands and make contact. It really is nice."

Viel said that is just part of their goal as a group of Christian men.

"This is faith at work," Viel said. "We're a good faithful group first, then we add the fun."

Types of clowns:

White-faced clowns use makeup to exaggerate facial features and expressions.

Grotesque clowns have large noses, skullcaps or other headgear to simulate an unusually shaped head with a tiny hat.

Auguste clowns have a flesh-tone base, outlined mouths and eyes encircled by white paint. They wear exaggerated hats and coats with wide lapels.

Character clowns encompass a variety of people such as cowboys, tramps, housewives and butchers. The most common character clown is a hobo, based on the American hobo riding the trains, wiping the soot away from his eyebrows and mouth creating a tramp look. The costume is tattered and torn.

Pierrot is one of the main characters of the "Commedia del Arte," which later evolved into the white-faced clown. They are often females.

Famous clowns

Abbott & Costello, American comedy duo known for their routine, "Who's On First?"

Bozo the Clown is the best known clown character in the United States because the character was franchised and the word "Bozo" is now associated with a foolish person.

Captain Kangaroo, children's program on CBS from 1955 until 1984 played by Bob Keeshan.

Charlie Chaplin, "Little Tramp" his signature toothbrush mustache, bamboo cane, light coat, oversize pants and shoes and derby hat.

Chico, Groucho and Harpo Marx, brothers, and comedians, who appeared on vaudeville, film and television.

Lucille Ball, star of the "I Love Lucy Show" played a character clown of a housewife who was always getting into trouble. Among the most famous segments is the candy gobbling scene.

Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, first met in 1921 and starred in their first film "The Second Hundred Years" in 1927, which started a 30-year partnership.

Peggy Williams was the first female graduate of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Clown College.

Red Skelton began his career as a teenage clown and later moved to vaudeville, Broadway and MGM. His best known characters were "Freddy the Free Loader" and "Kadiddlehopper," a routine about the "Pledge of Allegiance."

Source: www.clown-ministry.com

