

Catholic Courier

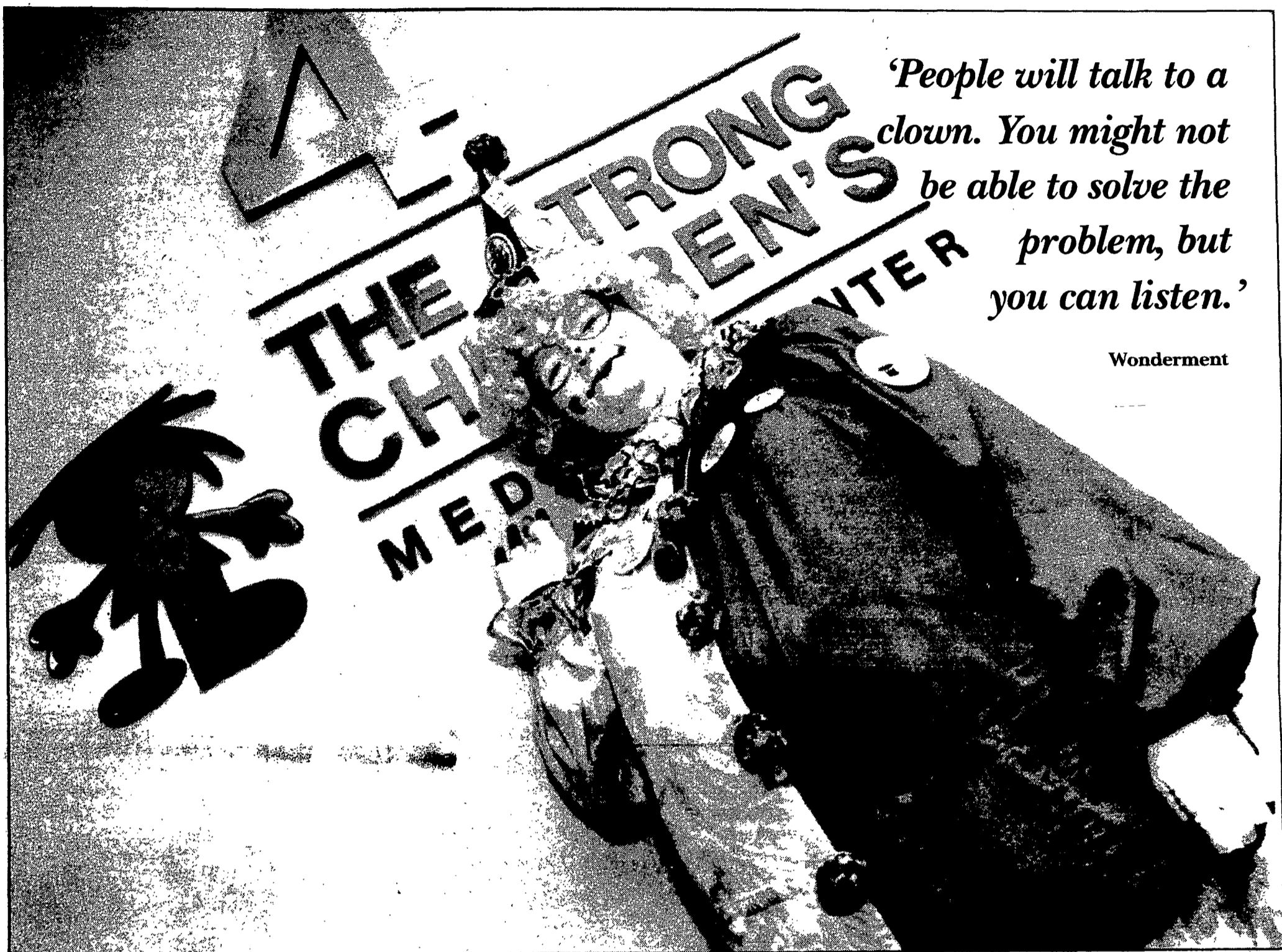
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S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Sister Marie Marshall, RSM, a.k.a. 'Wonderment the Clown,' performs semimonthly visits at Strong Memorial Hospital where she frequents The Strong Children's Medical Center located on the hospital's fourth floor.

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

A few years ago, Sister Marie Marshall, RSM, visited the Veteran's Administration Hospital in Canandaigua.

The retired teacher entered a room where people were listening to a barbershop quartet. Sister Marshall noticed one man sitting by himself. She went over to him, took his hands, and began swinging them in time to the music. Soon the two of them were up dancing.

Then, she said, the man began to cry.

"He just sobbed and sobbed and sobbed," Sister Marshall recalled. "That was a breakthrough. The attendants said no one had been able to get through to him before."

But Sister Marshall had. Or, to be more accurate, the feat was accomplished by Sister Marshall's alter ego, "Wonderment, the Clown."

Sister Marshall has been a clown for some six years, visiting area hospitals on a regular basis. As a clown, she tickles patients and visitors with a feather duster; cuts out tissue-paper shapes; plays with people or simply listens.

But Sister Marshall does not see her clowning as silly: it is a ministry.

"The main reason I keep clowning is to make people

laugh and to ease the tension," she explained. "People will talk to a clown. You might not be able to solve the problem, but you can listen. They are relieving themselves of what is bothering them."

"Clowning for me is a tool for ministry," observed Pat Donohue, pastoral assistant and youth minister at Holy Name of Jesus Parish in Rochester, and for the last 19 years, "Mr. Beau, the Clown."

Although he generally performs professionally in nonreligious settings — libraries, parties, festivals, etc — Donohue modifies traditional clown routines to help convey messages about faith, caring for others and family.

"Part of the message is that it's OK to have a faith-filled life," Donohue said. "God is an integral part of my life, and I like to share

that with people."

Thus, for example, Donohue will incorporate the fact that he is a Catholic into jokes and routines, or will mention in some way his love for his wife and children. But he will do so in a way that doesn't hit people over the head, he said, noting, "It's a non-threatening way to share the good news."

And like Sister Marshall, Donohue sees clowning as a way to comfort others.

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Clown ministers become 'fools for Christ' to give others a sense of God's love, joy