

Cleo Hollaway

Cleo Hollaway was an outrageous tease. He kept the residents at the Crown Center, where he lived in a handicap apartment, on their toes and sometimes on edge. You may have found him sitting in his wheelchair on the ground floor by the elevator—a good place to attack people as they came and went—and make them smile. Or he may have been in one of the Center's meeting rooms in a serious discussion at the weekly Men's Club. He was so popular that the residents dubbed him Mayor.

I asked once if he wasn't afraid of really offending someone with his teasing. For example, Cleo, his humble background showing, seems to get by with asking for "possum and sweet potatoes" in a place which keeps a kosher dining room and kitchen. The Center was started by the National Council of Jewish Women but Cleo at times wore a cap having a snout and pig's ears when he went to lunch. Or he brought out one of his astounding array of animated toys whose antics made anyone smile. "I know when I'm going too far," he replied in a subdued tone of voice I hadn't heard before.

Before coming to the Crown Center in 1997, Cleo was a regular volunteer at the Wood River Hospital until the hospital, on the verge of closing, was terminating many of its programs. Cleo found it more and more difficult to find a place that needed his talent of helping people take troubles in stride with a smile or a prayer. A car wreck curtailed his activities further and he finally moved to the Crown Center to be nearer his daughter, my wife. He soon found new ways to serve others and became a popular escort by accompanying residents to their doctor appointments in the Center's bus or pushing ladies in wheelchairs to a nearby beauty parlor.

Cleo was a large man— 6'4" and 250 lbs. One winter evening, a resident walking past the BINGO crowd complained of being cold. "Here, I'll warm you up," Cleo said as he put his arm around her shoulders. But he lost his balance and took them both down on the tiled floor. She had seven stitches taken in her head and he received a hip replacement, telling the doctors that he fell for a woman.

Now, he was on the other end and was the receiver, given help by the other residents of the Crown Center. With indomitable courage and a great attitude, Cleo was soon able to resume life in his apartment taking care of personal chores on his own— with help from a motorized chair lift and a walker. He kept his sense of humor. However, a second fall shattered his other leg and confined him to a wheelchair. He started wearing golf gloves to protect his hands from bruises and chaffing in working the wheels, important for a diabetic. At 88, he was managing on his own again although he hired a friend to help him with showers, had a weekly housekeeper, and someone to do his laundry. He dressed himself, prepared most of his own meals, and kept up with six different prescriptions.

He still found ways to serve. He volunteered to be in a play put on by the Center residents and later was the only male in a fashion show. When Cleo stood briefly at his chair as he took center stage, the M.C. stated, “You’re looking good, baby.” He replied, “I know it!”

He befriended Sylvia who was as different from Cleo as she could be. She was slim, soft-spoken, very sophisticated, and blind. She was often found pushing Cleo around in his wheelchair—he providing the eyes and she the power.

For many years, Cleo played Santa Claus at the Peppermint Preschool in Highland, Illinois. While at the Crown Center, he played Santa Claus at the Midtown Habilitation Center on South Grand. The thirty-two patients one year were developmentally disabled but Cleo was able to connect with each one in a way that brought smiles to their faces and tears to the eyes of their caregivers.

Art students at Mary Institute Country Day School were brought to the Crown Center to gain experience in handling wrinkles in doing portraits of older people. Cleo volunteered to pose. The results were wonderful; the student, who took a picture of Cleo, saw more in this man than the camera. She gave his head a little more tilt and used twinkle-wrinkles to highlight his eyes.

Cleo's range of service was curtailed over the years but he demonstrated ever more clearly that it is possible to make a contribution to life in a circle of any size.

