

Clownin' around

May 6, 2023, according to recent declarations by both the city of Topeka and the state of Kansas, is “JR Juggles the Clown Day.” **Jerry Loney**, a Topeka, KS Branch 10 member, has spent the last 40 years performing as and perfecting the act of JR Juggles. To celebrate the day, Loney performed a free 40th anniversary show of his “silly clown antics” in a park in North Topeka. He was introduced by Topeka Mayor Mike Padilla, who also presented him with a recognition certificate.

Prior to the May 6 event, Loney hadn’t done a show in three years because of the COVID-19 pandemic. While he had some booked, they kept getting canceled. “I’ve got to remember how to do everything,” he said before the event.

JR Juggles is an “absent-minded, forgetful, 8-year-old clown boy who loves to have fun,” Loney said. He has a custom red, yellow and blue clown costume, and oversized clown shoes, which look like yellow Converse high-tops. He’s a member of the Clowns of America Inc., the Society of American Magicians and the International Brotherhood of Magicians. He’s even appeared in two made-for-TV movies.

“Anybody in Topeka would say, there’s only one clown we know, and that’s JR Juggles,” he said. But what they probably don’t know is that “all through grade school, junior high, high school and even into college, I was really shy and bashful.”

After graduating from college, a friend suggested in summer 1981 that he try out for the local dinner theater. “I didn’t get the part, but I started volunteering at the Topeka Civic Theatre,” Loney said. “And I kept auditioning and got shows.”

For one part, he learned how to juggle so he could be Touchstone,

the court jester, in the Shakespeare play “As You Like It,” but the show ended up getting canceled, so Loney became what he calls a “closet juggler” because he couldn’t use it for anything.

A few years later, he became friends with another actor who juggled, and the pair got together to do juggling tricks.

His friend called Loney about a popular electronics and photography store that needed clowns, mimes and jugglers for its photo fair the first weekend in May, but Loney initially turned it down.

“I knew my lines and my blocking [stage positioning] with each show, and doing street corner entertaining is impromptu, which I didn’t know that I could do at that time,” he said. “He twisted my arm and told me that I could make a few bucks, so I accepted his offer. Nobody knew me, so I could make a fool of myself as a clown and goof off.”

That first time, he said, “I wasn’t the best clown, I didn’t have the best makeup or costume. I just threw something together to go out there and juggle, and then I kept getting better and better. May 6, 1983, I started clowning around, and been doing it pretty much ever since.”

Loney was hooked, and he started learning more about the trade of clowning by reading books and taking seminars, workshops and classes whenever he could. He soon began learning and doing more magic, and later added animal balloon twisting to his areas of expertise.

His stage fright has never fully disappeared. “Every show, I’m a little bit nervous before starting,” Loney said, “but I found out you’re supposed to be, because that means you’re alive and you’re doing something.”

When starting out, he’d go to fairs and festivals, bring his bag and say, “The clown’s here!” Though he didn’t get paid at first, he was getting his name out there.

Over the course of his thousands of shows, Loney has had a repertoire, starting with performing his clown rap that a high schooler helped him write years ago. He then juggles, using three red, blue and yellow balls, then juggling clubs (or even small toilet plungers), followed by a magic act—kooky stuff then serious, real magic, he says.

He continued: “I don’t do it like David Copperfield”—whom he’s met, he adds—“I want my magic to be silly and fun.” He likes to have kids from the audience help, too.

The carrier likes to end his shows with a little inspiration, including an act he does with his “dream bag,” where he pulls items out of what looks like a regular lunch bag.

Crowd enthusiasm helps his performance and he says that no show is ever the same. “I love hearing the applause and hearing the laughter if something goes right,” he said. “It’s an adrenaline rush for me. I love seeing those smiles and I love taking away their heartache or depression for that 45 minutes or an hour.”

Loney signs off by saying, “Keep a song in your heart and laughter in your soul.”

The carrier is inspired by many performers, including Jimmy Stewart, Emmet Kelly, Red Skelton, Jerry Lewis, Buster Keaton, and Abbott and Costello, all of whom he’s learned from.

“I was basically a self-taught clown, and I’ve learned through the school of hard knocks what not to do, what to do, and then after I learned it, I started finding out about these clown conventions, and started going to them,” he said. “After a while, they tagged me and said, ‘Hey, you know all this stuff, you’ve been a clown forever, why don’t you be one of our trainers?’”

When he first started out, “I didn’t treat it as a business, so I wasn’t making

money,” he said. Loney now earns \$150 an hour for events such as birthday parties, company picnics, family reunions, grand openings, school carnivals and church events in Kansas and beyond, though he also does some charity events.

Through his involvement with the Lions Club and through his church, he’s gone to Honduras twice with the Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity, and he has attended other mission trips following natural disasters.

“My ‘paycheck’ from a free event is seeing the joy and laughter from people because of my volunteer efforts,” he said. “I am providing a needed service that people cannot do without—laughter, humor and good times.”

Besides the pandemic, other difficult periods to be a clown were when coulrophobia—or fear of clowns—was at its peak. First it was during the 1980s after the movie “It” came out—“Stephen King’s a great writer, but that scared me half to death,” the carrier said. And it evidently scared others as well: “I didn’t get a show for a year and a half, two years.” And in more recent years when news reports told of clowns scaring people across the country, his work also took a hit. “They’re not clowns who are doing this, they’re just people acting stupid,” he said. “‘Clown’ means good, kind, funny, joyous. You can’t put ‘clown’ with ‘scary’—you just can’t.”

In those cases, Loney’s also prepared to do gigs as simply “JR the Juggler” in a toned-down outfit and minimal makeup, or as “JR the Magician” in a traditional suit with some magical flourishes.

Besides being a clown—and now a letter carrier—Loney also has been a kindergarten teacher, substitute teacher, preacher and motivational speaker. He joined the Postal Service as a letter carrier in August 2022.

Jerry Loney in uniform (below) and as JR Juggles



“It’s kind of hard being a newbie under 12 months” because of his unpredictable schedule, he said, adding that once he makes career, he could do his clown events on Sundays or late afternoon/evenings.

The self-described “funologist, laughologist and humorologist” is learning new tricks all the time and says he hopes to continue clowning around for as long as he can, while delivering mail for another 10 years. “Once I get careered with the Post Office and get more days off, I’d like to start getting back into the clown conventions” and train more people, Loney said, adding that he hasn’t been in four years. He says that he’d like to help the art of clowning flourish

by teaching the next generation of clowns, because as things now stand not many people are going into it. “Clowning is a dying art,” he said, “but we need to keep it active.”

Loney’s job as a clown in the entertainment industry provides him with a sense of accomplishment, creativity and pride, he says.

“I didn’t think I’d ever be clowning around for 40 years,” Loney said. “But it’s exhilarating, because I get to spread joy and laughter. There might be some people in the crowd that are not feeling very good, or they’re upset about something. But for that little bit of time in that moment, I’m creating joy for them, they can throw away their problems, and they’re laughing.” **PR**

