

THE SWITCH

From clown doctor to environmentalist

Nursing and acting are an unusual combination but for Kate Harris, experience in both led to an uncommon job.

"Clown doctors use performance as diversional therapy in children's hospitals, to change the situation or lighten things up when things aren't going well," she says. "They're performers who play and interact with children and families."

For three years, Harris (known as Dr Love-bug) dispensed laughter as medicine as part of The Humour Foundation's hospital work.

"The joy of the clown is that they are often the fool," she says.

"It empowers children, as they have control over the clown in an environment where they have very little control, including over their body."

While every day was different, it wasn't always easy.

"Sometimes it's about being funny and blowing bubbles, other times it's just being there for the kids and their families," she says. "Particularly when kids have life-threatening illnesses, they can be more accepting than adults, if the kids are little. It's when there's a procedure [that difficulties arise]."

Harris stopped clowning when the competing demands of finishing a master's degree in social ecology and parenting two young children got too much.

"Social ecology focused me on adult education and coaching and social change and leadership," she says. "Previously, my career had been focused on creating change with people but through social ecology I met lots of people working in service of the planet."

After a stint as a coach, Harris became the Sydney director of the

non-profit-making Centre for Sustainability Leadership.

"I help build the capability of passionate people who want to make a difference in the world, predominantly in the environment. I work with a diverse group of inspiring and dedicated people in NGOs, corporates and government, through to entrepreneurs and grassroots community campaigners."

The role has different challenges from clown doctoring.

"I love that I'm still working with people quite intimately and having

'I help build the capability of passionate people.'

Kate Harris

insights into their personal world but in a very different environment. As a clown doctor you could make a difference instantly; it's sometimes a bit harder working with adults. In the corporate environment, people ask for change and want it but the reality is that it's confronting."

Working with future leaders requires Harris to help people keep an eye on the big picture. "People often have high expectations of themselves. There's a danger of burnout in sustainability, as people who are passionate about meaningful change can get very disheartened if there's a lack of progress," she says.

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SALARY \$20,000-\$30,000
WORK LIFE BALANCE "You could request the days you worked, so it was very flexible, although there was a reasonable amount of travel to various hospitals. Three shifts a week is really the maximum; it's an intense emotional time and you're performing at a high energy level."
HOURS "28 hours a week."



Sustaining challenges ... Kate Harris helped sick children as a clown doctor (above); her new role involves caring for the environment (top).

SALARY "\$80,000. It's pro-rata, as I work four days a week. The other day I'm working on my business innovation consultancy."
WORK LIFE BALANCE "Working for a [non-profit organisation] involves struggling for resources, while doing something that can't wait. Ensuring delivery of high-quality training requires passion and commitment from me, just like we expect from participants. Now we're growing our capacity, work-life balance is better."
HOURS "32 a week. I also work Wednesday evenings and go to evening events to keep up with the latest in sustainability."
MISS "Laughter and colour. And play! I still have two of the puppets on my bookshelf."
CHALLENGES "Australia is quite behind on [sustainability] policy and I don't see why we should be: we have the capability, intellect, and resources in areas like renewable energy."

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