

# Herald & Review

Decatur, Illinois Saturday, March 22, 1997

## Greasepaint mixes with the gospel

By VALERIE WELLS  
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR -- This preacher is a real clown.

Under the name of Waldo the Clown, Decatur native Steve Walden teaches the Word of God, complete with big red nose, floppy shoes and balloon sculptures.

"My motives and my message are just as strong and detailed and structured as if I got up there in a three-piece suit," said Walden, 38.

"I am a preacher," he said with a grin, "I just wear a little bit more makeup than the average guy preacher."

Walden, the son of Duke and Carol Walden of Decatur, visited his parents recently, as he does whenever he's in the area doing a performance. He graduated from Warrensburg-Latham High School in 1977 and trained as a youth minister at Lincoln Christian College, graduating in 1981.

He served churches in Colfax and Whitestown, Ind., before settling in Lebanon, Ind. and taking up the greasepaint full time.

When he first created Waldo, shortly before his daughter Lisa's birth 15 years ago, clowning was just a part-time tool to teach the kids in his church.

"Whenever you illustrate something, the retention level goes through the

roof," Walden explained. "Jesus taught that way. Whenever he taught any kind of concept, he tied it in with a physical object or an occupation in the town. That's where we think about salt and light and shepherds and tax collectors."

But Waldo was so popular, and Walden received so many requests for Waldo to appear that he went into clowning full-time 7 1/2 years ago. He travels some 30,000 miles and gives more than 250 performances a year.

His venues include churches of all denominations, schools, day care centers and birthday parties. And he's not just for kids, either. His programs can be tailored to fit any crowd. And he really has preached -- from the pulpit -- in full Waldo mode.

"Mainly people have me come in at other times," he said. "Sunday school, youth groups, children's church. What they're getting is something with as much meat as any sermon they would hear. That's always been at the forefront of what I do. I want this to be a learning time."

Waldo's act includes the usual clown paraphernalia -- balloon animals, juggling and magic tricks. But Waldo makes sure the audience knows the magic isn't real.

"I make it very clear in my programs, especially in my church programs, that nobody does real magic," Walden said. "What a magician does is an illusion, and anybody can do it with practice. I don't want anybody going away saying, 'We saw this clown, and he had these amazing powers.'"

That's because the Christian message is the most important part of Waldo's performance, Walden said. The whole purpose of the Waldo persona is to proclaim the gospel.

And to Walden, Waldo is another person. With tongue-in-cheek, he even speaks of himself and Waldo as "we."

"Being a clown helps you explore that part of you that no one's ever seen," Walden said. "Waldo, being a different person, lets me get up and explore that part of me."

Being a self-employed clown has its financial drawbacks, Walden said. There are months when he wonders if he and his wife Cheryl, who works in the Lebanon Public Library, will manage to pay the bills. But they always do.

"What makes (being a clown) exciting for me," he said, "is there's always the risk factor. Anything that could possibly go wrong has gone wrong. That's part of the fun. You never know exactly what the audience is going to do."

## Clown is at head of class

By VALERIE WELLS  
H&R Staff Writer

In addition to his own performances as Waldo, Steve Walden also teaches clown ministry classes, and part of the curriculum is writing a biography for one's clown character.

Walden instructs his students to give their clown a birthday, hobbies, a history -- and to think of their clown as separate from themselves. That way, when they're in character, they're free to do and be whatever their clown is without self-consciousness.

The clown's makeup, Walden said, is so important that each face is unique. His Waldo face is on file with the National Clown Registry in Washington, D.C.

"A clown's face is very personal, just like a fingerprint," Walden said. "There's a code of ethics. You're never, ever to (copy) somebody else's makeup. A clown's face is alive."

To create a clown face, Walden said, he looked in the mirror and smiled and frowned and watched his face to see what was naturally prominent. Then those features were the ones he emphasized with his clown makeup.

It takes Walden two hours to prepare for a Waldo show -- one hour devoted just to makeup. It has to be perfect, and it has to be exactly the same each time.

"When I become Waldo, I am a completely different person," Walden said. "There are things that happen with my voice that kick in automatically, (and) my thought process is completely different. I don't even have to think about it."