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Their mission has always been simple — to bring joy in the hearts of both the young and the old.

Armed with various homemade puppets and alternately outfitted in an oversized red bow tie, a striped orange and red chimney hat topped with their signature, coat tails, and carefully made up clown faces, Alex and Gwenn Bell have made innumerable trips to local nursing homes and fundraising occasions in the last 15 years. Their contribution was doing what they have always liked to do best — in Gwenn's own words 'horse around and liven up the atmosphere.'

Originally from Trenton, the Bells have been making their routine entertainment calls around the Trenton-area nursing homes and charity organizations long before they moved to Belleville about four years ago.

Alex Bell, a retired air force warrant officer, finally retired from his second occupation as an electrician for Bata Footwear in Batawa in 1987 while his wife, Gwenn, retired a year later from her position in the bookkeeping department at CFB Trenton. But the couple was not ready to completely retire from their involvement in the community. They began volunteering at fundraising events for service and organizations, local fairs and parades.

Soon after their retirement the couple joined the Trenton Senior Glee Club, members of which go to local nursing and retirement homes and present entertainment with songs. The Bells went along with them bringing along their own entertainment as clowns.

"I remember seeing the difference in the atmosphere as we started to get our audience clapping and singing along. There was interaction and I think we, dressed as clowns, livened things up without putting pressure on the audience to come out of themselves and enjoy themselves openly. It was satisfying. They tell us that they talked about us for days after our appearance," said 77-year-old Gwenn.

Her husband nodded in agreement.

"When you see this person sitting quietly in her wheelchair and she lifts her head up and smiles, you know you've done your job. That was our reward for our efforts," added Alex, who will be 80 in January.

The Bells make their own costumes and puppets at home. Gwenn added that her knack for colour coordination helped in making the costumes appear pleasant and not gaudy. She recalled an incident when it appeared that children were frightened of Alex when he wore a multicoloured curly wig and instead of attracting the children, they had appeared

fearful. Mindful of that, neither of them wore it again.

"I think children find one solid colour more pleasing than too many on one piece of wig. Probably the multicoloured one did not blend well with the rest of the costume, I don't know. You see, it was like that. It was trial and error all the time. Lately, we have come to understand what works with which audience and what doesn't. It all adds to the fun of clowning," said Gwenn.

Having won an audition once, the couple has been attending the Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto for the past seven years as members of the cast to entertain endless throng of visitors at the Seniors' Jubilee.

"We don't really have an act. We just go there, mingle with the crowd, dressed in our clown finery and horse around. When we are in our clown costumes and make up we are at more liberty to be free with ourselves. For example, I can go hug and kiss someone or simply rub noses with them leaving their noses red, in front of their spouses without inhibitions. You see, underneath that clown facade you feel more free than in your normal appearance," she laughed.

Just as well for her husband who she claimed to be a shy, quiet-natured person.

Alex and Gwenn are slowing down their active schedule gradually as both are stricken with arthritis. Their plan for next year is put on a 'wait and see' basis.

"It takes us generally one hour to get ready before any appearance and when we come back home we are so tired having been on our feet all those hours. We can't do that anymore," said Gwenn.

Meanwhile to their delight, the fun of clowning is being continued in the family through their daughter, Heather, granddaughter Patricia and little great granddaughter.

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