



Ralph Donsky, a Cushing's disease survivor, uses magic to entertain sick children.

Ralph Donsky is a senior systems engineer for Raytheon IDS at the Integrated Force Protection & Security Center. He is currently the systems lead of an effort to perform a Software Failure Mode Effects and Criticality Analysis (FMECA) on the Ballistic Missile Defense System (BMDS) radar.

An Engineer's Prescription for Hope

BY RALPH DONSKY

In one of my favorite songs from *The Lion King*, "The Circle of Life," Elton John sings about the path unwinding. Each of us travels down this path every day, and sometimes a turn in that path leads us into a brick wall. This happened to me in June 1993, when I was stricken with Cushing's disease, a rare hormonal disorder that changed me from a healthy and active husband and father to someone who couldn't take care of my own personal needs.

A tumor depleted the amount of calcium in my body and prevented my bones from absorbing this important nutrient. This resulted in the development of multiple fractures in all of my ribs and compression fractures in my spine. My upper spine collapsed, reducing my height from 5 feet 10 inches to 5 feet 4 inches. After unsuccessful surgery to remove the tumor, I suffered a major heart attack and spent two weeks fighting for my life in a hospital bed.

Fueled by a love for my family and job, I developed what I call an unstoppable "Resolve to Survive." I was determined that my life would not be prematurely cut short, and was motivated to recovery by thinking about one of my favorite hobbies — magic — and setting a goal of one day entertaining sick children with magic tricks.

While lying in bed in a great deal of pain due to my fractured ribs, I would distract myself by working out stories to accompany my future magic performances. I returned to work part-time, 15 months after the onset of my Cushing's disease, and immediately followed through on the promise that I had made to myself.

I bought a bright orange shirt embroidered with the name "Magic Ralph" and began traveling to

local hospitals to perform magic once a week for children in pediatrics, oncology and the emergency room. It was very sad to see so many children with serious illnesses and injuries, but very satisfying to bring smiles to their faces. Doctors and parents were sometimes amazed, as I was able to get children who weren't speaking to shout and react to my magic tricks. After each performance, I would bend over and show the extreme curvature in my upper back. I tried to motivate the children by using myself as an example of someone who recovered over tremendous obstacles.

After moving to work for Raytheon IDS in Huntsville, Ala., in November 2004, I immediately looked for volunteer opportunities at local hospitals and discovered that Huntsville Hospital was just about to start a clown training program. I

joined right away and was in training from mid-January to the beginning of June. I learned how to put on clown makeup, create a costume and develop a routine. I now volunteer every two weeks as "Skippy the Clown" on the pediatric floor of the Huntsville Women's and Children's Hospital.

Today, I am stronger and healthier than I have ever been in my entire life. I maintain the same

resolve that I developed during my recovery, coupled with an intense exercise regimen and a heart-healthy diet.

Being in a hospital has to be one of the most difficult experiences a child can ever face — they are separated from what is known and familiar. To me, there is nothing more important in this world than being able to bring a smile to the face of a child who is ill in a hospital bed. Hope is the best medicine, and smiles and laughter can change despair into hope and lead to recovery.



"Skippy the Clown" demonstrates his magic coloring book to a child at Huntsville Hospital.