

# URBINO PROJECT 2014

## Multimedia Journalism in Italy



## Laughing Your Way to Health



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**Alessandro Bedini's Academy of Laughter teaches Marche citizens about the benefits that laughter, good humor, and positivism have for physical and psychic well-being**

Even the air of the hotel dining room seemed light and bright. Ropes of multi-colored flags lined the walls, and vibrantly hued balloons bounced around. "*Benevento amici,*" Alessandro Bedini said to each group that entered, adding a hug or a warm handshake. Glass pitchers brimming with Marche wine beckoned from the tables. Whiffs of freshly baked bread lured guests into filling the vacant chairs.

When the guests were seated, the antipasto was served. Thoughtfully composed, each plate held a small mound of lightly dressed spinach topped with chopped nuts and a petite portion of marinated liver.

*“Fegato è molto importante”*—liver is very important—announced Daniela Storoni, Bedini’s wife and mastermind of the menu. She explained that the chemical composition of “good-mood” foods triggers the production of neurotransmitters that control thoughts, emotions, and mood. Liver contains vitamin B-12, which is scientifically linked to strong mental health.

Before long, the room became filled with sounds of joy. Grandmothers jumped up to belt out the “Tarantella,” a fast-paced folk song. Young and old shook their hips to the beat of the music.



As Alessandro Bedini, director of the Academy of Laughter, watches, two participants enjoy a game of pop-the-balloon during the “Dinner of Cheerfulness.”

For Bedini, this was more than just a boisterous dinner party. It was therapy in action, a “Dinner of Cheerfulness,” held at Urbino’s Hotel La Meridiana and designed to relieve stress and lighten the spirit. Bedini is the head of the Accademia Della Risata—the Academy of Laughter—founded in 2006.

The Academy is a non-profit association dedicated to enlightening Marche citizens about the benefits that laughter, good humor, and positivism have for physical and psychic well-being. Throughout the year, the Academy holds a variety of workshops for hospital patients, nurses, students, teachers, and corporation personnel.

Studies have shown that laughter—whether real or fake—can heal the body and spirit. As a psychologist for Urbino’s Health One Hospital, Bedini teaches that happiness can be found everywhere if you just “reach into your pocket and pull out a smile.”

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*Happiness can be found everywhere if you just “reach into your pocket and pull out a smile,” says Bedini.*

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Bedini’s cheerful office is an unexpected relief from the gloomy and windowless hallways of the rest of the hospital. Colorful abstract artworks cover the walls of his narrow office. A collection of multi-colored books about famous artists such as Picasso and Raphael stand alphabetically on the top shelf of a tall bookcase.

Bedini reaches over and points to a book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, lying on a shelf of his crammed bookcase. In this 1979 memoir, journalist Norman Cousins described his battle with a serious and painful skeletal disease. Cousins, also referred to as the modern father of laughter therapy, “made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give [him] at least two hours of pain-free sleep.” Cousins’ attributed his recovery to doses of self-prescribed laughter therapy.



Bedini works to spread cheer in his office through colorful artworks.

Inspired by Cousins’ memoir, Bedini began developing programs devoted to spreading laughter throughout the Marche region. A few years ago, he created the program “A Smile in the Ward,” dedicated to promoting individual wellness for both the employees and patients of the Heath One Hospital.

Bedini has worked closely with Patch Adams, America’s best-known laughter therapist to divide “A Smile in the Ward” into three program areas. Adams writes on the Gesundheit Institute website that “the well-being of the staff is as important as the well-being of the patients.”

The first area is “A Smile in the Ward: Soul Tour.” Working inside the hospital walls, this program incorporates the techniques of *comico-terapia*—the use of laughter, jokes, music, and comedy—to spread cheer to hospitalized patients. Bedini tells his patients “your problem is not a mountain, and it can be overcome.”

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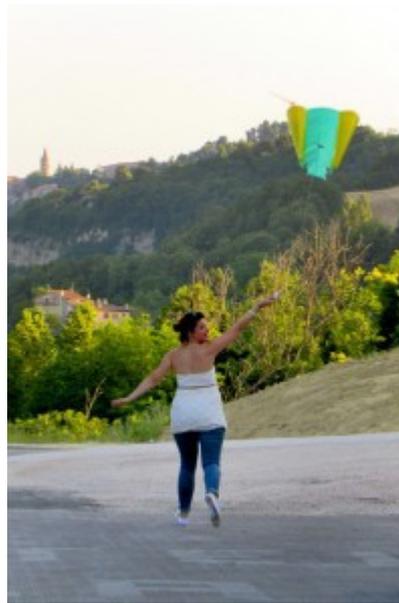
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The second area concerns “Training of Health Personnel,” which works to strengthen the bond between nurses and their patients by communicating positivity and encouragement.

The third area, “Wellness Project,” is designed to improve working conditions while raising awareness of methods for reducing stress. In coordination with the University of Urbino, Bedini provides psychology students with hands-on experience within all three areas of the “Smile in the Ward” program.

Once Bedini recognized the healing value of these techniques, he expanded his programs to include schools and corporation. In schools of all levels, he takes children through a seminar called “The Hours of Smiles” to give students the tools to improve classroom performance, reduce stress from examinations, and increase self-esteem to help reduce bullying.



A participant learns to fly her kite against the backdrop of the Urbino hills.

With corporations, Bedini and his assistants teach employers to create humor within the workplace to better relieve stress and handle office politics.

Back at the hotel dining room, a man sporting a tuxedo jacket, red-and-black parachute pants, a floppy orange hat circled by a red-and-white polka-dot ribbon, and a red rubber nose was instructing the crowd to make kites. This man was Sirto Sorini, 81, and better known as Clown Geppo.

First, Geppo enlightened the crowd with a brief history of kiting. “Kites are symbols of joy and the desire to smile,” he said. Making them from recycled material, he said, sparks the imagination and creativity. Then he pulled out a cardboard box overflowing with colorful sheets of plastic, and, on cue, everyone rose to their feet eager to get started. These kites, Geppo told the crowd, are the same kites given to patients during the “Smile in the Ward” program.

At the beginning of the evening, everyone’s laughs had seemed staged and insincere. But since then, they had flown kites, sung karaoke, danced, and popped balloons that they had stuffed inside their shirts. Now the laughter was clearly genuine.

*This article also appears in Urbino Now magazine’s Urbino Focus section. In a few weeks, you can read all the magazine articles in print by ordering a copy from MagCloud.*