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Not Just Clowning Around: Patch Adams, MD, speaks at URI Honors Colloquium on humor, health

MARY KORR
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

KINGSTON – **PATCH ADAMS, MD**, 70, dressed in billowy bloomers with blue-streaked hair which he hasn't cut in decades, addressed a full house on the power of humor and friendship at the URI Honors Colloquium Sept. 22.

A graduate of Georgetown University and the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine in 1971, he was the inspiration for the 1998 film "Patch Adams" starring the late Robin Williams.

"Friendship is the best medicine, the strongest human possibility – humor is a good grease," he said. "The most revolutionary act one can commit in our world," he added, "is to be happy." He said he dresses the way he does to "break down barriers between people."

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he was the inspiration for the 1998 film "Patch Adams" starring the late Robin Williams.

Born in Washington, DC, he grew up on military bases throughout the world. His father was a career US Army officer, until his untimely death at age 52. Patch's mother, a teacher, returned to the states with her family. Patch was 16 at the time. He shared episodes of being bullied and beaten up in high school, his sense of isolation after his father's death, and his multiple hospitalizations for mental health issues.

After being released from a psychiatric facility for the third time, he says he decided to "never have another bad day, to live in a mindful, intentional way, to be happy all the time." Describing himself as an extreme extrovert, "humor gave me back my life. I decided to be happy, funny, loving, cooperative, creative and thoughtful – I am only going to be those qualities."

He said it took him his college years to achieve this, and at age 22, he entered medical school to use the profession as a vehicle for social change. His primary interest was in studying health-care delivery systems and putting the care back in health. Upon graduation, he founded the Gesundheit Institute to improve medical care. (Gesundheit means "good health" in German.)

During the talk he described the concept of the communal hospital he and several like-minded physicians and their families opened in a large, six-bedroom house, offering free care, room and board for all, with no malpractice or health insurance.

"We had anywhere from 1,000 to 3,000 'guests' a month, many of whom had profound mental illnesses," he said.

His philosophy, and those of his colleagues, was that "medicine is an art not a science." Jokes, play, theatrics



Prior to his talk at URI on Sept. 22, Dr. Patch Adams, comedian, author, social activist and clown, paid a visit to patients at Kent Hospital with URI students.

were all part of the compassionate care they offered.

The facility, which he called the first "silly hospital in the world," lasted for 12 years. "We made living funny and dying funny." He added: "I never made money in 45 years as a doctor and that is why I am a happy physician."

Currently, he's working on building a "model health care community" on 310 acres in Pocahontas County, West Virginia. The site will also have a theater and arts and crafts shops, as well as horticulture and vocational therapy.

More than five years ago, Dr. Adams stopped seeing patients so he could raise money to build the hospital. He now travels the world with his clown-clad entourage, visiting clinics, hospitals, refugee camps, and making speeches to raise money for his hospital.

He invited those present, students, physicians and academicians to join him on his bi-monthly clown-care tours, no experience necessary. For more information, visit patchadams.org. ❖