

# Clowns might weep over state of art



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NEWARK, Ohio — It's a tough time to be a clown.

Pop culture has labeled you creepy. Something called the Insane Clown Posse has stolen your look. If a child's not screaming in terror at your big red nose, there's a chance his parent is.

Choo-choo doesn't work a fraction of the birthday parties he used to, and forget corporate picnics, he said: Some companies just don't want to risk a lawsuit from the parent of a traumatized child.

"Kids are not exposed to clowns like they used to be," said Choo-choo, real name Patrick Wesley, a 60-year-old clown from Newark. "Anniversaries, birthdays, picnics, all of that's fallen to the wayside."

That might begin to explain why attendance at ClownTown, the annual school for beginner clowns, has dropped steadily in the past decade. Figures that peaked at nearly 350 in 2000 are down to about 35 for this year's event today. That's the same number of beginner clowns that showed up when the conference started in Newark 23 years ago.

"It's pretty much a known fact that we're seeing a decline," said Blondi, real name Teresa Gretton, a Maryland clown who'll be one of the "deans" at this year's ClownTown. "We reach out constantly to try to find the younger people to come forward and to join us."

But that group seems to shy from squirting flowers and wearing oversized shoes. Wesley, a ClownTown organizer, recently taught a clowning class in Kettering where only one of the 52 attendees was younger than 40. He thinks younger generations harbor both a dislike of clowns and a disinterest in volunteering. Gretton believes they simply can't afford to clown around.

"In households today, people need to work," said Gretton, who started clowning 30 years ago while she was a stay-at-home mom. "They're not able to find the time to go out and do the different things they want to do."

That's assuming people want to be clowns. Clowns get it: Some people think they're evil. It's understandable. While older generations have fond memories of the wacky and lovable Bozo the Clown, younger people remember *It*, the 1990 TV miniseries starring a pointy-toothed demonic clown who gleefully killed children. The popularity of Insane Clown Posse, a controversial hip-hop duo that wears gruesome makeup and encourages its fans to do the same, didn't help things, either.

"I had one little boy say to me, 'Clown, you gonna kill me?'" said Shananigans, a Michigan clown who serves as the Midwest regional vice president for Clowns of America, International.

Shananigans, real name Georgia Morris, said clown-convention attendance all over has dropped. Where a Midwest conference might have drawn 700 clowns 25 years ago, now it gets about 200. Morris blames the decrease not on a lack of clowns but on soaring gas prices and a market flooded with too many clown conventions. Yes, too many clown conventions.

Nobody is ready to say clowns are headed for extinction. The traditional Bozo look — white face, red nose, exaggerated features — is on the way out, and modern clowns are wearing lighter makeup and embracing a muted, more-European style, Wesley said. But clowning, which has roots in ancient Egypt, isn't going anywhere, he said.

"I don't see it ever dying," Gretton agreed. "It's comedy, and our world today needs comedy."