

Make 'em laugh

Denise Thomas, administrator, Gastonia (N.C.) Surgical Associates

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Have you heard the one about the surgical practice administrator who keeps her colleagues and patients in stitches?

Excuse the pun, but that's the kind of light-hearted humor Denise Thomas, veteran administrator of a five-surgeon group practice, employs in her comedy act before medical, civic and charitable groups.

Thomas, 54, wears a gray wig and padded nurse's uniform to take on the role of Gladys Friday – "because I'm always glad it's Friday." Her character is a wise-cracking matron with a twangy Southern drawl who is "lumpy and bumpy, fighting gravity." On stage, she occasionally takes snuff (smokeless tobacco), "but it's really just chocolate."

She started her act two years ago as a way to educate the public and her colleagues about medical issues. "Laughter is the best medicine," she says. "Humor has helped me get through some rough times in my life, and I want to share that."

She often uses the unintentionally hilarious remarks by patients, such as the man who asked the front desk for his autopsy report. "Well, you may have to wait a while for that one," Gladys quips. Or the female patient who inserted a suppository without removing the aluminum wrapper. "She can't fly anymore. She sets off alarms at security!"

Corny? Sure. But with Gladys' homespun delivery, it always gets a laugh. Once the audience is engaged, she launches into weightier matters, such as riffs on insurance companies and how doctors and staff can improve relations with patients.

"An office worker I call May B. Later always puts off work to do another time," Thomas says. "As Gladys, I rib her about it. If you can help a patient by faxing records or phoning in a prescription, why put it off? Studies show there are fewer malpractice suits if a patient has good rapport with the staff. When employees are disorganized or cold, seeds of doubt may take root in patients. I try to get that message across."

Acting isn't new for Thomas. When her daughters were growing up, she earned extra



Denise Thomas ... and her alter ego Gladys Friday



money performing at children's birthday parties as Alice in Wonderland and other characters. She credits Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett and Vicki Lawrence as comedic inspirations.

Her act is well received by colleagues, but the group's senior surgeon fears she'll become too successful and leave the practice.

Not a chance, Thomas says. "I've been with the practice 32 years so far. (Pause) I think I'm gonna like it." She just can't resist the one-liner. 🇺🇸

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