

**Ledger-Enquirer (Columbus, GA)**  
**as provided by The McClatchy Company**  
**September 17, 2011**  
**Columbus man pays it forward**  
**Author: LARRY GIERER, lgierer@ledger-enquirer.com**

There is a new clown in town, one who has a special reason to don makeup and a funny nose. At 13, Clyde Hill Jr. suffered severe burns over 40 percent of his body, the result of a campfire accident. For eight years, Shriners International covered the cost of his treatments. This weekend, he will make his debut with the Shrine Circus at the Columbus Civic Center.

"This is not really a big deal," Hill said. "We've all had someone at some point in our lives that made a positive impact on us. Becoming a Shriner and participating in the circus is simply my way of paying back the men and women who made sacrifices when I needed it."

It was January 2010 that Hill, 41, decided to become a Shriner and began the process that came to fruition recently.

"Most people don't realize the impact Shriners have on the lives of children, the importance of fundraisers such as this circus, but I do!" the Columbus man said. On the night of Jan. 6, 1984, Hill was a Fort Junior High student. He and his friends had been roller skating and decided to camp out in the new tent Hill had received for Christmas. The boys had a campfire in the backyard of Hill's Midland Road home. They cooked hot dogs and marshmallows. Having put the fire out, the boys crawled into their cots to sleep, but around 2 a.m. the temperature dropped. The boys got cold and decided to relight the fire. To speed up the fire's progress, Coleman stove fuel was used. "We were pouring it on the fire like stupid kids," he said. Either the stream of fuel flowing to the fire or the fumes from the can ignited. "It went up into the can and shot out at me like a flame thrower," Hill said. The impact knocked him over. The top part of Hill's body was set aflame. Hill began tearing at his clothes. His friends rolled him on the ground. They threw a bucket of water on him.

"They saved me," Hill said. Once the flames were out, Clyde walked to his house. "My legs were fine," he said. "My mother about fainted when she saw me. My face was kind of just hanging." His parents rushed him to The Medical Center. "The pain was terrible," he said. "I can't describe it."

Hill was hospitalized for two days. "They called in the burn team and got me stabilized," he said. It was decided he needed to go to the burn center at a Shriners Hospital in Cincinnati. The father of a friend, a Shriner, made the arrangements. A private jet loaned by a local company flew him north. Hill was there for six months, the first three in intensive care. He underwent painful debridement, scrubbing with a "Brillo type pad" to get the burned skin off. Plastic surgeries were done. He figures he's had about 30. They took skin off his legs to use in other areas.

Doctors weren't sure he'd have the use of his right arm or the fingers, so they taught him how to do everything with his left. "I'm ambidextrous now," he said. Hill received lessons from his school. Psychologists prepared him for the reaction of other kids. "I was terribly disfigured," he said. A trip to the local zoo was part of that preparation.

His father, Clyde, who worked for Georgia Power, and his mother, Pat, who worked for Union Carbide, lived in an Ohio apartment provided by the Shriners. All of the costs were paid by the Shriners, including trips back to Ohio until he was 21. "Shriners became part of my family," he said. "Shrine members I didn't even know would stop by to see how I was doing, to see how my parents were doing."

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He recovered, graduated from Shaw High School in 1988 and Auburn University with a degree in electrical engineering in 1994. He married his high school sweetheart, Stacie.

They have two sons, Reece, 21, who attends Kennesaw State University, and Blake, 11, who attends Blackmon Road Middle School. He is national account manager for Relational Technology Solutions. "Clyde Hill is the real deal," said Mark Cantrell, circus director. "People like Clyde are what the circus and Shriners are all about." Members of the Columbus-Fort Benning Shrine Club transport children to a Shriners Hospital in Greenville, S.C., twice a month. Cantrell, also involved in raising funds for St. Jude Children's Hospital, said that organization does a better job of informing people about its important work. "Shriners marketing probably hasn't been as good as it should be," Cantrell said.

As with St. Jude, no child is refused treatment at a Shriners Hospital because of lack of funds. It used to be Shriners covered all costs but six months ago the hospitals began accepting insurance money. Hill is looking forward to his clown debut. "I just want to see some smiles," he said.

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