

**T**hreaded through the crowded emergency room, Diana Chiles and her puppet, Bernard, sit down with a 9-year-old girl at Le Bonheur Children's Medical Center in Memphis. A car accident has just claimed the lives of the child's father and her sister, paralyzed her mother, and broken the child's hand.

When her family and friends try to comfort her, the girl cries harder. But when she hears Bernard speak in Diana's soft, Memphis-bred accent, her face glows. "You wouldn't think in a time of great crisis that a puppet would be anything that could comfort," says child life specialist Diana. But invariably the little puppet does.

## A New Career Is Born

A former teacher, Diana holds advanced degrees in education from Mississippi College in Jackson and family counseling from Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth. While in school, she wrote a thesis on puppets. Now, after working 18 years in health care settings with Bernard, she knows the tot-size puppet offers giant-size healing.

Sporting a bandage, a patient I.D. bracelet, a hospital gown, and 101 Dalmatian slippers, Bernard remains a perpetual patient at the 210-bed Le Bonheur, which cares for children with everything from sore tonsils to terminal illness.

"I'm not a ventriloquist; the children see my mouth move," says Diana, "and yet they respond to him as if he were alive." With no nose and no thumbs, bright green Bernard crosses cultural, social, and physical barriers Diana might not be able to overcome. "He gets me in the door," she says.



## Diana Chiles

*with her puppet, Bernard, at Le Bonheur Children's Medical Center*

*"I have the power to give children a good moment in their day."*

Diana Chiles

## A Puppet Patient

Once inside, Bernard, as a patient, goes through medical tests and pre-surgery classes with children who pretend to be doctors and nurses. The puppet loves Le Bonheur's real-life doctors and nurses, but responds just like a kid during "treatment"—he hollers, he cries, and he sings irreverent songs. ("If you take my blood, my achy breaky blood, I just might throw up in a pan," he wails.)

"Grown-ups say to a child, 'Don't cry, be brave, be good,'" Diana says. "They'll say, 'It's a little needle' and 'It's like a bee sting.' Bernard, on the other hand, will think the needle is *10 feet long*." Working with Diana, the pint-size doctors and nurses coax Bernard through his exaggerated fears and, in the process, deal with their own.

## Making a Difference

At times, the role of comforter takes on a serious tone. Children have asked Diana, "Am I going to die?" She uses her seminary training to help parents respond to their children's tough queries. And she uses a sweet-faced moppet to illuminate the children's lives even during their darkest times.

"There is nothing harder than watching a child suffer," Diana says softly. "But I have the power to give children a good moment in their day. My presence makes a difference," the child life specialist says. "Not many people can know that with their jobs."

She once heard someone say, "The puppet possesses a soul . . . the hand of the puppeteer." Surely, Bernard's soothing soul stems straight from the goodness in Diana's heart. *Nancy Dorman-Hickson*