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Chicago Youth Circus juggles performing, teaching

By Kellie B. Gormly
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Among kids, coming from different parts of town and socioeconomic rank can impede friendships. But when kids join the circus, an amazing union happens, says the director of an internationally known children's circus coming to perform Sunday.

The Chicago Youth Circus, which will play outside the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh in the North Side, features 17 young people, ages 12 to 20, from the Chicago area, who will perform numerous acrobatic stunts and antics. The circus is the main program of Chicago-based CircEsteem, a nonprofit that aims to build the self-esteem of kids and unite youths from diverse racial, cultural and economic backgrounds for a common passion and talent, says program director Maribeth Joy.

"In doing that, we build self-esteem and respect," Joy says. "When (kids) come together to do circus, it doesn't matter what kind of car your family drives. It matters how many balls you can juggle. It really is a family environment where we take care of each other.

"I watch my students grow and change and blossom into young adults."

The circus, which travels the globe every summer to perform, offers classes at both public and private schools throughout the Chicago area. Fees are on a sliding scale, and while donations are requested, children who can't afford to pay still are welcome to join, Joy says. The kids can learn skills ranging from juggling and tightrope-walking to clowning.

"There's something for everybody in the circus," Joy says. "If you're not really coordinated, you might be a really funny clown. There's a place for everybody, no matter how skilled you are, shy or outgoing you are."

Kids who take the classes and join the Chicago Youth Circus build their confidence by learning difficult skills that look impossible, like juggling numerous balls, Joy says.

"We build every 'I can't' into 'Wow, look what I can do,'" she says. "We say, 'You can't do it yet.' ... That's what's so magical about the circus -- that transformation from, 'There's no way I can do that' to 'Wow, look what I can do; I can do anything.'"

As for kids in the audience, they, too, can be inspired to learn acrobatic skills, Joy says, by watching their peers perform them. The actual show will last only 15 minutes, but the remaining 45 minutes are reserved for workshops, where

performers can demonstrate and teach skills like juggling to the spectators.

"Kids see people their own age doing things they never thought they'd do ... and learn it," Joy says. "It becomes something very tangible, very soon after seeing it."

Angela Seals, program manager at the museum, says the Chicago Youth Circus' appearance is part of the ongoing "We Can!" initiative, a program that promotes fitness and healthy living. The Chicago circus performers are amazing and inspiring, she says.

"The quality of the work they do with the youth of Chicago is really incredible," Seals says. "Our goal is to inspire children ... to build activity into their daily lives."

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