

Kids gain self esteem and juggling skills at camp

By PETER DENBANK
Sage Writer

SASKATOON

Another wildly successful Circus Arts Project camp ended with a big show for family and friends on Feb. 17. More than 70 children, ages eight to 14, had loads of fun as they showcased two of the six skills they learned during the week-long camp. Camp co-ordinator Cass Cozens said the circus skills are naturally exciting for the children. "Everyone tries so hard, and the level of accomplishment in such a short period of time astounds me every year."

The five-day event, now in its seventh year, was held during the February school break and is sponsored by the Northern Saskatchewan International Children's Festival, Cozens, who founded the children's festival and has produced the event for 18 years, brought the circus camp to Saskatoon after seeing the positive results of Circus and Magic Partnership, a circus camp held during the Winnipeg International Children's Festival.

"As an organization that works for children," she said, "the children's festival has a social responsibility to ensure that children's lives in the community are made better."

The Circus Arts Project camp is held each year at Vincent Massey community school in Saskatoon with children coming from various community schools and the core neighbourhoods. Among the children attending 1 his year's camp were a number of past camp participants coming back for another go at learning the circus ropes.

The campers are divided into six groups and in the first two days, take turns at learning all six skills—trapeze; tight wire; clowning and puppetry; unicycle; juggling; and stunts. By the end of the week, each child selects two skills they wish to perform during the final show held to wrap up the camp.

And why do they come to the camp?

"Because it's fun," explained

Cayla Saulteau, age 11 and in her second year at the camp. Ben Fineyda, in his third year, agreed there are lots of fun things to do. "It keeps me occupied during the week," he said.

A central mandate of the program is providing an alternative to joining gangs and keeping children from the lure of the street. The original program in Winnipeg was developed by the producer of the Winnipeg festival, Neal Rempel, who is a former street performer, as were many of the original instructors in that camp. The connection they were able to make with the children, some of whom were street kids, was fantastic for everyone. Since it was first held in 1996, the Winnipeg camp has grown to 230 children with 17 instructors and 17 stations. It also has a northern component, where the instructors go to different reserve schools each year and work with children there, using local teachers and adults as group leaders.

The instructors for the Saskatoon camp, many who bring more than 20 years experience as full time performers to the role, come from all over. Tight wire is taught by Bob Palmer. Originally from Saskatoon, "Flying Bob" is now based in Red Deer. He is a full time performer and also teaches at the Winnipeg camp.

The wire used is 18 inches from the ground and about 10 feet long. Once that height is mastered, it can be raised to any height. For the camp, it is raised 30 inches above the ground or is raised at one end to walk the incline or the decline. "It's fun for the kids," said Palmer. "But it's also exciting because it's a little dangerous. At 18 inches, it's not bad, but once it's raised, falls and injuries can occur. But until you fall, you don't realize the skill involved. And until you risk something, you don't realize the importance of trust."

Robin Szuch, a full time aerialist performer from Toronto who taught the swinging trapeze, agreed trust is very important. The trapeze hangs 10 feet above the ground. A safety harness is used,



Participants in this year's Circus Arts Project camp gather for a group picture following a performance in which they got a chance to show off the skills they'd learned. The camp took place Feb. 13 to 17 in Saskatoon.

and Szuch holds the safety line during each ride. "They not only have to trust me," she said, "but themselves too. They learn that trust during the camp."

Juggling is taught by Mike Blattie of North Vancouver. A juggler for more than 20 years, he teaches the children to juggle balls, pins and rings, spin plates, or master the Chinese diablo or the devil sticks.

This year saw clowning and puppetry taught by Melba Toest, a clown from Prince Albert. Students worked with mime and puppets to perform skills that required focus and concentration, which are good skills for any active child.

Unicycle is taught by Sand Northrup from Vancouver. She said it's the sense of accomplishment they gain from the camp that the children can carry forward in life.

"Are they going to become unicyclists? Probably not. But are they going to say 'I can tackle the impossible and do it?' Maybe."

Stilts is taught by Tamara Ursoe from Vancouver. Students can try various sizes, from 8 inch to 36 inch. Some take naturally to the stilts, while for others, each year brings more skill. For some of the more experienced kids, playing football on stilts was an easy way to show their mastery.

"Trust is very important," Ursoe said. "You need to trust the

spotter, and yourself, and it's amazing that they come in basically as strangers, and within a few hours are trusting each other."

There are six group leaders to provide stability for the children and ensure each gets to their proper station. Barb Davis, a group leader since the camp started, does it because she loves children.

"A lot of them come in feeling they are a failure at everything," she said. "I've had one child say to me, 'I can do that. I'll fail. My mom says I fail at everything and my teacher says I fail at everything.' And I say, 'No you won't. We don't know the word failure. You're a success if you try.' Even if they take one step on the wire and fall, I congratulate them. Every child that came into camp with no self esteem whatsoever developed it in that five days. I find that the most miraculous thing. I always watch out for that the next year, and they do retain it and are building on it."

For Shirley Shumard, a grandmother who has been a group leader for four years, the camp provides a safe place for children. "What I see happening," she said, "is a cross-cultural type of interaction. The children are having so much fun together, they are all doing these challenges together and it's making it a safe

place for them to talk about other things like family issues or racism."

The Saskatoon Police also play an important role in the camp. Const. Leslie van Den Besken of the Community Liaison Unit has attended now for two years. "It's an awesome opportunity for the kids. They learn unique skills so when they are learning them, they're all on a level playing field. It gives the kids an opportunity to develop their self confidence and self esteem." The camp is also a great chance to build the relationship between the police and the community, she said.

"All too often, children only see police in scenarios where there is tragedy and trauma. This gives the children a chance to interact with the police in a positive environment and positive situations," she said.

Some former campers return to the project to volunteer. They are the ones who become mentors and leaders in their community, and that's where the real success of the program shows itself.

Jessica Roach, 16, was a camper for a number of years and is now a volunteer.

"It's time to share my talents with others," she said. "I loved being at camp but being a volunteer is so much more rewarding because you teach others the stuff you know."

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