Under the Big Top

BY JO CAVALLO

A stint in the circus transforms students’ confidence, school behavior, and class performance. Running away not required.

Kourtney, a 13-year-old from Chanute, Kansas, was so afraid of heights, says her mother, Kandi, “she’d close her eyes when going on an overpass.” But that was before the middle-schooler performed on the double trapeze. After that high-flying act, nothing ever seemed quite so scary to Kourtney.

No, she didn’t run away to join the circus. Instead, the circus came to her—and her classmates at Royster Middle School—as part of a novel program to build self-confidence and encourage teamwork among adolescents.

“I had to stand on a platform, lean out, then jump off and grab my partner’s hands,” recalls Kourtney. “I was really scared, but I knew that if I didn’t stay in the program, there wouldn’t be anyone else to take over.” Her perseverance paid off. After a week of rehearsals, Kourtney was flying through the air with grace and ease.

Kourtney’s experience isn’t unique, says Bruce Pfeffer, founder and director of Circus of the Kids, a Florida-based enterprise that teaches circus arts to children and teens. Each year, Pfeffer and his crew of performer-educators travel to schools throughout the country. In programs that run from one day to three weeks, they introduce students to the thrilling—and often unnerving—world of circus arts, teaching them everything from juggling and clowning to performing on the trapeze.

“Students go through a transformation during the program,” says Pfeffer. “They learn ‘stick-to-itiveness.’” He’s devoted nearly 20 years to sharing his passion for the circus with kids. “Everyone is nervous the first time you take the safety belt off or ask them to stand in front of a crowd, but once they realize they can do it, the sense of accomplishment is unlike anything they’ve ever experienced,” he says.

Circus of the Kids taught Kourtney’s twin sister, Kaleigh, a few life lessons, too. Assigned a bicycle act for which she had to perform upside down and pedal with her hands, Kaleigh caught her left hand in the bike chain during practice and broke three fingers. It never occurred to her to quit. “I really wanted to be in the act,” she says. “And even though I didn’t get to do that trick, I got to do another one.”

It was that promise of building student self-esteem and team spirit that compelled two Royster teachers, Dallas Masoner and Rexine Spencer, to bring Circus of the Kids to their school. After seeing the program in action at another middle school, the two teachers decided that it was the answer to two common middle school concerns: the proliferation of cliques and low self-esteem among some students.

“The program brought together kids who normally wouldn’t hang out in school,” says Masoner, who teaches language arts at the 460-student school. “Kids who didn’t sit together at lunch or talk with each other during the day worked as a team on their circus acts.” Interaction among students in the classroom, the cafeteria, and the schoolyard also improved, he adds.

After a three-day introduction, Royster students auditioned for the circus. Everyone who tried out took part, thanks to Pfeffer’s commitment to full participation among interested students. Pfeffer and his staff pick the performers’ roles, often giving students assignments that will stretch them “further than they had ever imagined,” he says.

The circus program was also integrated into the curriculum. In history class, students conducted research and gave presentations on the origins of the circus. In art class, they interviewed professional circus performers and created posters to advertise the event.

Although raising student achievement wasn’t the primary focus of the program, Masoner believes the circus did just that. “Our assessment tests went up after the circus program,” he says. “When kids are excited about something, they’re going to do better in the classroom. I’ve been teaching for 11 years, and this is the best thing I’ve been involved with outside of classroom teaching.”

Jo Cavallo is a freelance writer in New York City. Write to JCava15579@aol.com.

How much?

Programs are geared toward middle school students and run two to three weeks. The cost varies, but a typical program goes for $20,000, the cost of which is usually defrayed by donations, fund-raisers, and ticket sales. For more information, visit www.circusofthekids.com.