

Not just clowning around

The lights dim, the carnival music begins, and soon an energetic circus show is underway, complete with clowning, juggling, ring-tossing, stilt-walking and tumbling.

This isn't your typical circus, however: Most of the performers are kids between the ages of 8 and 12 who are enrolled in CircEsteem, an extracurricular program designed to help kids build confidence while they learn circus tricks in a fun, non-competitive environment.

CircEsteem is the creation of Paul Miller, a former Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus clown, who created the program after moving to Chicago last year.

Miller and his six volunteer circus professionals visit schools and community groups, where they teach elementary and middle-school kids clowning, juggling and acrobatic skills. The program culminates in a circus performance for the students' families and friends.

SPOTLIGHT

• Janet Chang

CircEsteem's first location was Alternatives, Inc., a nonprofit community organization in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood. After Miller provided several well-received free sessions at the center last November, Alternatives consulted with parents and community members and decided to provide a 2-month grant to bring the program to neighborhood kids, who would not have to pay to participate.

"We wanted to see the youth engage in a physical activity, not necessarily competitive, inclusive of boys and girls, and really fun," says Alternatives' program specialist George Roumbanis.

In February, 20 kids who were referred by a network community organizations enrolled in CircEsteem. "[Most of] the kids had never performed, never seen a

circus," Miller says. "They only read about circuses in books."

For the first class, Miller and his team dressed in clown costumes and demonstrated tricks. Some of the older kids were skeptical. "They didn't know what a somersault was, and they didn't want to do it," Miller recalls.

But after eight weeks of motivation and training—the class met twice a week for 90-minute sessions—the kids were able and eager to walk on stilts, spin plates, juggle and "globe walk" on giant balls.

"The circus arts are so unique," Roumbanis says. "[The kids] can create their own activities. Anyone can find something they're good at."

Paola Oviedo, 11, says she's gained more confidence since joining the program. "They'll be close to me and they won't let me fall," she says of Miller and the other instructors.

Some of the quieter kids became more outgoing and more comfortable with their bodies, Roumbanis adds. "It really

challenges them to do things," says Roumbanis. "Miller brings two very unique qualities: high professionalism and an ability to work with and motivate youth."

For their graduation on April 6, 15 kids performed in their first circus show, CircEsteem: The Greatest Kids on Earth, before an audience of more than 70 parents and children.

Charles Weaver, of Des Plaines, was in the audience as his grandson Joshua, 8, performed. Having watched Joshua per-



formed in numerous school skits, Weaver was struck by the creativity and substance of CircEsteem. "There wasn't much to them. The kids couldn't express themselves," he says of the school skits. "Here it seems like they're really able to express themselves."

CircEsteem is now being offered as an after-school program at seven Chicago-area private schools, including Francis W. Parker School in Chicago. "Parents love it," says Francis Parker program director Stacie Newmark. "They're surprised at what their kids can actually do. We judge the success of our programs through how many kids continue to sign up, and that's what we're seeing with CircEsteem."

Next year, Miller hopes to arrange a CircEsteem Chicago Youth Circus, in which students from the private schools will perform together with the kids from Alternatives. "I hope to unite kids in a circus where skill and a desire to perform and entertain eclipse the difference in race, money, language and reli-



gion," Miller says. "I want to keep exposing kids to the wonder of circus and provide the opportunity for them to be in center ring."

For more information on how to join CircEsteem or start the program at your school or community group, call Paul Miller at 312/593-4242 or e-mail CircEsteem@yahoo.com.