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## Circus school: Getting fit while having a ball

By Vanessa Renée Casavant  
Seattle Times staff reporter

Demonstrating a hand-to-hand headstand, Charles Johnson balances his business partner, Jo Montgomery, straight in the air, upside-down above his head.

Using nothing but their hands, balance and trust, the two remain in unison for more than half a minute until Montgomery says she's ready to come down.

The exercise demonstrates more than just focus and agility for their students at The School of Acrobatics and New Circus Arts in Seattle. It shows what a little bit of trust, some hard work and a lot of fun can accomplish.

Montgomery, a former gymnast and pediatric nurse at Odessa Brown Children's Clinic in Seattle, and Johnson, a professional gymnast and founder of the Cascade Youth Circus in Portland, opened the school in January 2004. Their goal is to get kids more physically active in a fun atmosphere that instills confidence.

With a trapeze, unicycle, two huge trampolines and a tightrope, it's hard not to have a sense of childlike enthusiasm here. Kids are allowed to be kids in this space, Montgomery said.

"We don't say wrong, and we don't say don't," Johnson said. "Students don't leave feeling punished, they leave feeling refreshed."

Shiloh Ratcliffe, physical-education specialist for Seattle Country Day School, took her seventh- and eighth-grade classes to the circus school twice a week last year as part of a program to introduce students to nontraditional forms of exercise. She said 90 percent of the kids voted the circus school their favorite exercise.

### The benefits of juggling

There are five types of classes offered at the circus school — juggling, acrobatics, trampoline, aerial (trapeze and hoop) and a combination class. Johnson and Montgomery rotate students among the different activities, to enhance their strength, flexibility and trust in others.

Ratcliffe said the classes helped her students get over their fear of trying something new. "Those who were more reserved definitely felt more confident at the end," she said.

The teachers break circus stunts down into small pieces so students don't feel overwhelmed, Johnson said. For example, a forward roll takes six steps.

"That moment they accomplish something, it's a universal smile," Johnson said. "It's a privilege to watch that happen."

Ingrid Hurlen, office manager at Billings Middle School in Seattle, said the circus training had a positive impact on 20 Billings students who attended the classes.

"It really put them on an even playing ground" and helped them learn how to work together, she said. "I think it brought a lot more focus to their academics as well."

Juggling is one of few vigorous activities proven to enhance analytical skills, Johnson said. There is a rhythm that builds while juggling, and as students progress in their skills they can play around with it by adding more items to juggle or using different ones.

One student, whom Montgomery described as rather small and shy, came into his own through juggling. She said he gets lost in the activity for hours and has a new confidence from the muscle tone he's gained.

### **Building excitement**

Obesity rates among children and adults have been on the rise for the past 10 to 15 years, and getting kids excited about being active is essential to reverse the trend, said Dr. Lenna Liu, a circus-school board member and assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington.

Without engaging physical activities, she said, children can spend too much time in front of the television and computer.

"When most people think about becoming active, they go straight to running and competitive sports," Liu said. "What Jo's vision was, is that a person of any shape or size should go to the school," and that they don't need to be physically fit right away.

It's very important, she said, to get kids excited about being active at a young age because motivation declines as they get older. A survey conducted by the Washington State Department of Health in 2004 shows that as children get older, their amount of physical activity decreases. Over a seven-day period, 5.5 percent of sixth-graders reported having no physical activity, while 19 percent of 12th-graders did. If healthier lifestyle habits are instilled at a young age, there is a good chance children will carry it on with them as they grow up, Liu said.

### **Combating obesity**

The circus school began with an "aha" moment. Montgomery was trying to come up with a way to address the growing problem of childhood obesity she saw at the Odessa Brown clinic. One day, as she was teaching an adult gymnastics class, the idea for a circus-arts school came to her. She wanted a place kids could go to become invigorated about physical activities, and not feel pressured.

She approached Johnson, who has taught gymnastics for 15 years. He'd been noticing a lot of negative coaching in competitive sports and liked Montgomery's idea. He saw a need for replacing competition with creativity and putting the fun back into being active.

Once the idea for the school was formed, almost everything fell into place. "It almost had a mind of its own," Johnson said. They didn't do any advertising, and by the end of the year they had almost 200 students and needed a larger space.

The school is now located on South Orcas Street in Georgetown. From the outside, it looks like a huge storage facility with a loading dock. Inside however, the reds, yellows, blues and greens of the equipment and mats pop out against the bleak walls of the space.

At any given time, there can be a number of activities going on, whether it's an instructor practicing juggling with bowling pins or a student taking one of the large colorful rolling globes for a ride.

While children were the primary focus when Montgomery and Johnson opened the school, adults are welcome, too.

Liu, who takes some of the adult classes at the circus school, said she's addicted to them. "It gives a childlike enthusiasm," she said. "The reason I can't get enough of it is that I just turned 40, and I haven't been able to do somersaults since I was 7."

Nearly all of the classes are divided by age group accommodating anyone 6 and older. Johnson said there are age modifications for every activity. For children younger than 6, the school offers a movement class.

"We give out about as much as we get in," Johnson said. The school was established as a nonprofit so they could have better access to public schools and offer scholarships to anyone who needs help.

Johnson and Montgomery said they knew going in that their work at the school would be a "salary optional" endeavor. Montgomery still makes a living as a nurse and Johnson said he's living mostly off the profit from selling his school in Portland.

Circus-school classes are priced according to length, ranging from \$70 for eight 45-minute classes to \$168 for eight 120-minute classes. The goal is to provide scholarships for at least 30 percent of the students, Montgomery said, because she knows that if you can provide access to physical activities, half the battle against childhood obesity is won.

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