

## A special needs program that helps children learn to fly

When the idea arose to create a circus arts program for the special needs community, Actors Gymnasium's Executive Director Virginia Nugent saw it as the perfect opportunity to help another community "learn to fly."

Located in Evanston at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, the Actors Gymnasium offers two classes tailored for students with autism ages 10-14 and students with Down syndrome ages 16 years and older.

The non-competitive recreational Circus Arts, taught by certified instructors who coach according to each person's abilities, provides instruction in a variety of circus disciplines, including aerial arts, tumbling and dance.

"After the first session, parents said they saw improvements in the self-esteem, motor skills and focus of their kids. Parents also noticed an increase in their kids' willingness to try new things," says Deanna Myers, education coordinator.

The program had 100 percent retention from the first class to the last in the first session.

Some students have even started to integrate into the typical classes as well after taking the special needs class first, Myers says.

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