

Special needs classes begin at Actors Gym

By Eric
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The Actors Gymnasium has renovated Studio 108 in Evanston's Noyes Cultural Arts Center from an office to a professional circus studio. This new space allows the gym to launch a pilot program for students with special needs.

The work to renovate the space involved removing a fireplace, installing a floating sprung dance floor, and adding room-length twelve foot mirrors.

Studio 108 will also house the newly minted professional circus training program and rehearsals for annual shows. Additional classes, including juggling and aerial skills, as well as early childhood development classes have been added to the gym's schedule.



Work on Studio 108 in the Noyes Center.

Two special needs classes are now offered -- one for children with autism ages 10-14, the other for adults with Down syndrome ages 16 and up. These programs offer a wide variety of circus techniques, including tumbling, dance, aerials and juggling.

Students in these classes are coached according to their ability by instructors Kasumi Kato and Charlene Numrych.

Kato, who studied under Carrie Heller for over five years and has many years of experience in therapeutic and recreational settings with both Down syndrome adults and autistic children, said the classes are a first for The Actors Gymnasium. "In both classes we practice juggling, acrobatics, aerial apparatuses such as the trapeze, and other core building and motor control exercises," Kato said.

"Each day is intentionally physical and social," Kato continued. "There are many physiological reasons why circus is great for the body, as in any exercise...Further, I see circus effecting people socially by inciting excitement, pride and social cohesion."

The practice in these classes is more about the process than an end product, but the students do get the chance to "show off" their skills every day at the end of class. However, Numrych believes a show could eventually come out of the special needs classes: "This session we have some very talented people, and it is conceivable that they could eventually perform in a show."

Numrych's experience working with special needs students goes back to swim class when she was fourteen, which she says made a large impact on how she grew up thinking of special needs adults.

Both Kato and Numrych are well-adjusted to the demands and excitements of working with special needs students, and are thrilled to begin this work with The Actors Gymnasium.



For more information about the special needs classes, call Actors Gymnasium at 847-328-2795.