

Do-it-yourselfers show their class - Back-to-school time not just for book learning

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An old Chinese proverb proclaims, "Learning is a treasure which accompanies its owner everywhere."

It's a state of mind instilled at an early age, and it doesn't stop the day we get out of school. But there comes a time when we are free to follow our more playful interests. And that means no more algebra, history or chemistry.

Take mandolin lessons. Throw a pot or two. Design a quilt. Let the funnyman out via an improv class. Make a movie. The possibilities for adult education are endless, especially in a city the size of Chicago.

"Always try to learn one new thing each day," was an inspirational rule followed by my immigrant grandfather. He drew a picture of the brain as just a "big old muscle," claiming it had to be exercised and you'd better get to it.

Looks like he was onto something. Today scientists are finding evidence that challenging the mind is one way of fighting the aging process and staying vital well into later life. But we don't need scientific proof in favor of learning. Here are some inspiring and energetic suggestions.

MAKING MUSIC

The Old Town School of Folk Music was founded in the mid-'50s by Frank Hamilton, Dawn Greening and Win Stracke, three music lovers who had a vision. Old Town continues to embody Hamilton's teaching philosophy: Everyone can learn, play and enjoy music in a supportive environment, regardless of skill or ambition.

Today classes are taught by more than 80 teachers, with a weekly enrollment of 1,000 students in group classes, 700 private students and 700 youths in the children's division.

Old Town is best known for group instruction. Classes are offered in a wide variety of subjects, including guitar, banjo, harmonica and autoharp, plus many classes that are not offered elsewhere in Chicago, including Latin rhythms for guitar, African drumming and flamenco dancing.

Over the years, Old Town has never lost its fresh and friendly atmosphere. It's the proverbial home away from home.

"Students want to learn, but being here and meeting other people with similar interests provides a kind of countercultural experience that harks back to a simpler time," said program director Michael Miles. "It's a haven from the rest of the world."

African drumming student Julie Marfell agrees. "The atmosphere at Old Town is really enveloping. When you're walking around with your instrument, just for a moment, you think you really are a musician. And that's pretty cool."

The fall session of classes is under way at the Old Town School of Folk Music, 909 W. Armitage. For more information, call (312) 525-7793.

STUDIO ARTS

The maze of classrooms at Lill Street Studios is dusty and worn, but every inch of space

is put to good use.

The drabness fools the eye at first. On closer examination, these rooms are enlivened by the work and enthusiasm of students following their personal visions via ceramics, metalsmithing, painting and drawing.

For the last 21 years, owner Bruce Robbins has guided Lill Street toward its current combination of classrooms, studio space and gallery. What was once a horse and carriage barn in the Lincoln Park neighborhood is today the Midwest's largest ceramics center.

"The classes at Lill Street are as good if not better than a lot of college-level classes," said program director Laurie Shaman. "Our teachers have a lot of experience and interesting backgrounds; they are a versatile lot."

Classes taught by working professionals are offered for both the casual and the serious student, with enrollment reaching about 500 students per session. Class fees include all materials and workshop time, which allows students to use the facilities any time they like outside of class.

Novice Jane Jacobs, bending over a pottery wheel, was shaping what looked to an untrained eye like a pretty nice bowl. "Oh, it's not too bad," she said, sounding unconvinced. "Working on a wheel can be difficult and frustrating, but the more experienced students are very helpful. It gives you hope."

One of these more experienced students, the ebullient Mary Fox, proudly displayed her latest creation, a lovely cutwork Japanese-style lantern. What began as a diversion four years ago has turned into an addiction for Fox. "I'm happiest in clothes covered with mud," she said, laughing.

A new season of classes begins Sept. 16 at Lill Street, 1021 W. Lill. For more information, call (312) 477-6185.

IMPROV COMEDY

Everyone's a class clown at the Second City Training Center - even the teacher. But it's not all fun and games. Just ask any former student; comedy is hard work.

There are no requirements for Second City's program for beginners except a willingness to take part, says Ed Garza, director of the Training Center. The classes are designed to be progressive, with each session building upon the previous one. Students who complete five eight-week sessions mount a 45-minute improvisational show for the public.

"Most sign up for the beginning classes because they've been told they are funny," Garza said. "But there is a discipline that must be built in improv. You have to know how to break the rules and still make it work. Then you can really soar in many different directions."

Improv classes also are taught at the Annoyance Theatre, 3747 N. Clark (312-929-6200); ImprovOlympic, 3541 N. Clark (312-880-0199); Piven Theatre Workshop, 927 Noyes, Evanston (847-866-6597), and the Players Workshop, 2936 N. Southport (312-929-6288).

A new session begins Oct. 7 at Second City, 1616 N. Wells. For details, call (312) 664-3959.

FIBER ARTS

On Diversey Avenue, just east of the Ravenswood L stop, is the Textile Arts Centre. This is where I met two lifelong goals: becoming proficient at knitting and weaving. It's also where I made a lot of new friends.

The center was founded 10 years ago by textile enthusiast Marilyn Murphy, who until recently was the owner of the Weaving Workshop, an exquisite yarn and supply shop. Murphy has moved on to other textile-related adventures in Colorado, but her vision remains in this not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting textile arts.

At the heart of the center is a strong roster of classes open to anyone interested in learning basic to advanced skills in knitting, weaving, quilting, machine knitting, crocheting, spinning and sewing.

But that isn't all.

"Our classes have evolved over the years to include a broader sense of the textile arts," said program director Roanne St. Claire. "The line is lightly drawn between useful craft art and the highly conceptual. We try to hit a balance between really good foundation techniques and creativity."

Newer additions to the roster include classes in surface design (such as painting a silk scarf), rug-hooking, basketry, dollmaking and beadwork. And a series of artists' workshops runs the gamut from marbling and dying to hatmaking and knitting design.

Weaving classes long have been one of the center's most popular offerings. Participants vary widely, from students studying the various disciplines of textile arts to passionate collectors who want to know more about the way textiles are created.

"And then there are those who are looking for an escape from a high-powered, stressful job and just want to chill out," St. Claire said. "But you have to be careful - textiles can become an obsession, too."

A new session of classes begins Sept. 16 at the Textile Arts Centre, 916 W. Diversey. For more information, call (312) 929-5655. PHYSICAL THEATER

For something really different, check out the School of the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston. Anyone who has ever wanted to fly on a trapeze or walk on stilts will be at home here.

"At the Actors Gymnasium, you'll find ordinary people doing amazing things," said co-founder Tony Adler.

Founded last fall as a training ground for the "new American theater" - a theater as likely to express itself in back flips as in dialogue - the Actors Gymnasium offers classes for students of all ages and at all levels.

Students can study circus arts and gymnastics with veterans of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus or work with masters of the new theater: drumming with Rick Kubes of the Jellyeye troupe, mask and puppet building with Douglas O'Connell of Redmoon Theater, commedia dell'arte with Andrew Micheli of New Crime Theater and tap dancing with Reggio the Hooper.

"We are really pleased with the response to the classes," Adler said. "The enthusiasm level has been really high; we seem to have filled a void."

The fall session starts Monday at the School of the Actors Gymnasium, located in Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes, Evanston. Call (847) 328-2795.

MAKING MOVIES

Filmmakers who may or may not aspire to Hollywood can get started in Wicker Park.

Established 23 years ago, Chicago Filmmakers has become a prime spot for screenings of commercially ignored independent films. Ten years ago the organization added classes and seminars in film production, editing and screenwriting. More specific seminars (such as optical printing or budgeting) also are offered.

One of the major attractions of Chicago Filmmakers is that it also works as a co-op. Students (or anyone else for that matter) can join the co-op and have access to film and editing equipment. That is a big plus when you're trying to make a movie for next to nothing, says co-op director Lou Anastas.

"I've seen people with no previous film experience create spectacular work," he said. "We

want to open up these creative possibilities for everyone."

Classes begin Sept. 24 at Chicago Filmmakers, 1543 W. Division. Call (312) 384-5533.

Caption: The daring young man and woman on the flying trapeze are Larry Distasi and Sylvia Hernandez, co-directors and co-founders of the School of the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston. A surface design student paints a silk scarf at the Textile Arts Centre, which offers a balanced curriculum of good foundation techniques and creative endeavors. Erin Morache puts the finishing touches on a wax mold for her silver ring in a lost-wax metal casting class at Lill Street Studios, the Midwest's largest ceramics center. Joan Carvell Keiler (left) and Pamela Diaz deLeon work on a routine in their flamenco dance class at the Old Town School of Folk Music. See also related story. Credit: TOM CRUZE; AL PODGORSKI

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