

Students flip for trapeze teacher

Chicago Sun-Times - Sunday, August 18, 1996

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She flies through the air with the greatest of ease.

She's Sylvia Hernandez, who teaches trapeze.

She also teaches teeterboard and other "circus arts" in Highland Park and Evanston.

She was born and raised in the circus. Her family gained big-top fame as "The Hernandez Troupe," teeterboard daredevils. She joined the act at age 7.

Here's how it worked: She would be propelled off a teeterboard, fly through the air, and land on her feet aboard the shoulders of a man who stood on the shoulders of another man who stood on the shoulders of another man who stood on the shoulders of another man. "I was the fifth person on the five high."

During one performance, she went too high and landed on the floor. She did a second show that day before going to the hospital and finding she had a broken back. "I recovered and jumped right back in" the act.

Now she's co-founder and co-director of The Actors Gymnasium in Evanston along with Tony Adler, Laurence DiStasi and Carl Coash. It's based in the Great Hall of the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, and teaches grownups and children "unusual theatrical arts" such as circus skills, gymnastics, stage combat, even tap dance. It's a year old.

"In summer, I've directed a circus camp the last five years in Highland Park," she says.

"Most kids I teach (in Evanston and Highland Park) will probably grow up to be doctors and lawyers, and I think if they don't, their parents will be very mad at me. I have had some people who were incredibly talented. They could easily try out for Cirque du Soleil and Ringling Brothers."

Maybe you even saw her in Ringling Brothers circus. "When my family split up, we were with Ringling. I never quit till 1990, when I decided I needed to try my hand at something else." The rest of the family "left two years after, and everybody has tried to do their own thing since."

She was born in Sarasota, Fla., "while my family was with the Mills Brothers circus. My father came from Cuba, my mother from Germany. My father was a gymnast in Cuba. He hooked up with my mother's family act and came over here. They got married and started their own family." She has four brothers.

She lives in Wrigleyville, is single, taught trapeze to actors in a Lookingglass Theater production, then began performing as a theater artist. "I've been here since 1991." Why Chicago? "Somebody invited me here. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me. The opportunities are endless."

Her philosophy: "Mostly I think people should never stop learning, never stop trying to do just a little bit more than they thought they could."

Caption: Sylvia Hernandez, co-founder of The Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, teaches trapeze stunts. Born into a circus family, daring feats come naturally to the Wrigleyville resident. Credit: ROBERT A. DAVIS

Edition: LATE SPORTS FINAL

Section: SUNDAY NEWS

Page: 53

Column: CHICAGO PROFILE

Index Terms: Sylvia Hernandez; ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT ; PROFILES

Record Number: CHI1049074

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