

Touching the Spirit in Oakland:

27 Years of Growth with the Prescott Circus Theatre

By Aileen Moffitt

I have had the most rewarding career that anyone could hope for. Recently retired from my direct work with the youth circus stars of Prescott Elementary School in Oakland, California, I have been reflecting on many aspects of my experience. I am grateful to AYCO for inviting me to share my thoughts at this juncture.

I grew up in Oakland with most of the advantages of the American dream. By age twelve, I was pretty sure I wanted to be a teacher in Oakland's less privileged neighborhoods. Ironically, my first professional assignment was to teach Physical Education at a junior high school in Oakland's wealthiest neighborhood. After several years, I decided I wanted to make a more meaningful impact by teaching kids to read, so I became a classroom teacher. When I accepted

a primary grade job teaching at Prescott in 1982, I had no idea I would call that place home for the next twenty-seven years.

I was terrible at it at first. I was overwhelmed. But I was also fortunate, because there were a handful of African American women teachers at Prescott who were willing to mentor me along the way. These relationships were the most important of my professional life, and paved the way for what was to also become my youth circus career.

Before coming to Prescott, a friend had taught me how to juggle, and I combined this newfound hobby with my summer employment with the Oakland Parks & Recreation Department, creating a summer program we called the Clownmobile. We visited parks, playgrounds, and local community centers daily, turning new batches of eager participants into clowns by teaching clown skits, introducing juggling, providing red ping pong ball noses, and letting them try on outfits from our boxloads of thrift store gems. We repeated the excitement fifteen times a week! It was exhausting, but I loved it. It gave me experience with all of Oakland's neighborhoods. In clown costume, I could shout, "Buenos Enchiladas!" in the Latino neighborhoods and give high-fives in the Af-

rican American neighborhoods. I put clown noses on toddlers in daycare, seniors in rest homes, and groups of children with various disabilities, too. Amazingly, there was a universal willingness to check us out and a high level of participation in all settings.



By the time I arrived at Prescott, I had a garage full of spinning plates, juggling scarves, and clown costumes. It was just a matter of time before I decided to offer an after-school series of clown classes. The first one was for my second graders of 1984-85. They presented the "First Annual Clown Show" and it was a total success; everyone seemed to love it, and my classroom thrived as a result.

The next year, I decided to try another series of classes, but this time I worked with the 5th and 6th graders, thinking

I might be able to teach

them more advanced juggling. Our success was only moderate, but again we presented a culminating show that was well received. I dragged my mentors onstage for the audience volunteer act. The crowd went wild to see Prescott teachers dancing to "You Must Have Been A Beautiful Baby," wearing clown noses and baby bonnets. We began receiving invitations to bring the clowns to local events. Our skills were pretty minimal, but the kids were so adorable, and the invitations just kept coming. We were beginning to build a reputation. Thanks to Judy Finelli, the Pickle Family Circus got a grant to send us our first teaching artists, and our circus skills grew along with our collection of equipment. I began writing grants to build on this foundation, using Friends of Oakland Parks & Recreation as a fiscal sponsor. The kids were still adorable, but now they had some juggling and acrobatics skills to boot.

Along the way, a cultural consciousness developed within me. I was becoming more and more aware of the significance of the fact that I was teaching outside of my culture. I hadn't originally given a whit of thought as to whether or not it was culturally appropriate to put whiteface on African American children, nor if "clowning" was even acceptable to the Black community. To me, it was just fun and seemed good for kids. I thought

AYCO

was founded in 1998 to connect youth circus programs in the United States. Since then AYCO has supported the growing interest in participation of youth in circus. We support youth circus activity through:

Upcoming Event

American Youth Circus Festival 2011
PAL Sailor Circus,
Sarasota, Florida
August 17- 21, 2011
"Children of All Ages"

The PAL Sailor Circus is thrilled to be hosting the 6th AYCO Youth Festival! We are planning four action-packed, circus-filled, relationship-building, totally exhilarating days under the BIG TOP! Eat, sleep, and drink rich circus past, present and future with a focus on Youth Circus through engaging workshops, activities, social events and excursions.

Workshops in the areas of aerial acrobatics, equilibratics, clowning and object manipulation will be offered at different skill levels for all participants. Showcase opportunities will be available for all Youth Programs bringing student performers. Trips to the historical Ringling Circus Museum and other local attractions will be included in the festival ticket.

Festival admission (2 meals/day included) for AYCO members is \$225, non-members, \$300. Reduced rates for non-participating chaperones. Sponsoring hotels range from \$69/ night to \$125/ night. Based on 4 people/room, total festival ticket, room, and food should cost around \$325 per person. State park camping is also available. Registration begins March 1, 2011 on the AYCO website at www.americanyouthcircus.org.

A limited number of full and partial scholarships are available. Application details are available on the AYCO website from January 1, 2011. Scholarship applications are due by February 28, 2011.

of clowning (and circus) as "universal" without realizing I was coming from my own Eurocentric background. This lack of thought, I later learned, is typical of white privilege. As a white person I didn't think to address cultural issues, because they didn't really cross my mind.

The 1990's were a period of unprecedented questioning. At Prescott, this translated to a deeper awakening and examination of the profound significance of the African roots of our students. My Prescott mentors were taking their passion about the importance of Black History to a deeper level. Prescott became the center of the Ebonics controversy. As staff, we steadfastly stood our ground on the premise that the home language of our students had to be respected as their first language and recognized as the linguistic continuation of African languages in America. The press (and others) misrepresented the situation, implying that we were throwing out "standard" English. In fact, we were pro-actively teaching the "language of the government," but in a context that honored the validity of their first language, too. We were also protesting the fact that resources, like time, money and staffing, were being allocated for the special language needs of our Mexican, Vietnamese, and Cambodian students, while the language needs of our African American students were being ignored. The African American Task Force of the Oakland Unified School District worked tirelessly to insist that the language, history, and culture of our African American students be utilized to support them. African American students were being assigned to special ed classes, suspended, and failing at alarming rates. They were the victims of institutionalized racism before we had names for the phenomenon. These are problems that unfortunately still go under-addressed, but our work did heighten the discussions of that time, and influenced those that followed.

This era pushed me to further examine my own work. I was learning to look through a "cultural lens" for every lesson, every discussion, every opportunity. This became the turning point that allowed me to promote social justice by recognizing and valuing the culture of my students as a top priority. The internalization of this point of view became the focal point of the rest of my career, and I believe it is what has made the Prescott Circus stand out from other programs.

As with most things in America, circus arts are credited as a European tradition. And as is also true in Amer-

ica, the African influence is overwhelmingly denied. We have researched this influence, in the tradition of Prescott School, where Afro-centric curriculum became a primary focus and brought our greatest success with children.

Here are some examples: Derique McGee has been working with us for 14 years. He is a role model and has performed professionally as a circus artist. His particular specialty is hambone, an African American form of body percussion. He has shared this with us, and we share it with our audiences. We offer it as an example of the creativity that demonstrates the resilience of Africans enslaved in America who created hambone in response to being denied their African drums by white slave mas-

ters who feared their power. With our students, we discuss the history and have the students practice telling the history themselves.

In the area of stilt-ing, we have learned about the African roots of stiltling and we honor that in all of our big shows. We have worked extensively with master stilter Shaka Zulu from New Orleans, who uses the oral tradition to share the

art of stilt dancing, along with its history and evolution in Africa and the Diaspora.

Our juggling act has a backdrop of the first recorded juggling: the Medu Neter of Kemet, or as the Greeks called it, the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt. Our students have worked with hip hop choreographer Carla Service, Yoruba priestess and storyteller Luisah Teish, and step dance instructor Antonia Jackson. When I retired from teaching in 2009, I was replaced by Jamarr Woodruff, who had most recently toured for three years as Ringling's Clown of Crunk, the only African American clown on the blue unit at the time. In a group study retreat, our students learned about the history of black-face minstrelsy. Mr. Woodruff shared the poignant story of his first time in whiteface that evoked ancestral pain, and how he had vowed to turn his clowning into a positive representation of his culture.

We also changed our name from "Prescott Clown Troupe" to "Prescott Circus Theatre" when my favorite mentor finally helped me understand that "clowning" has a negative connotation in the African American community. Becoming the Prescott Circus Theatre was a subtle but significant nod to that sensitivity.

The Prescott Circus Theatre became an institution in Oakland. We were known for our high level of circus skills and the quality of our productions only improved.



Above Photo: Prescott Clown Troupe of 1997. I'm still in touch with most of them via Facebook! — Photo: Prescott Circus Theatre

I eventually left the classroom to devote my full attention to expanding the program throughout Oakland. To this day, aspiring students still show me their cartwheels when I cross the yard and requests still come in regularly for us to appear at everything from the state fair to the mayoral inauguration. In 2001, thanks to Kevin O'Keefe, we took our kids to Florida for the first AYCO Festival. Our students were not only the youngest but also the only children of color in attendance at that time. Prescott Circus became a proud part of the national youth circus community.

The success of the Prescott Circus Theatre has been due in major part to the inclusion of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy. This perspective emphasizes relationships with students and families, high expectations, and a teaching style that promotes student participation and achievement. The emotional connections

and lifelong friendships that I have made are the best rewards for me. It is an honor for me to be accepted as part of the West Oakland/Prescott community. To the extent that I have internalized the Afro-centric curriculum that implores teachers to touch the spirit of the children, so has my spirit been touched. Applying all of this to circus – well, that was just secondary.

I look to others to use the AYCO journal forum to tell the stories of exciting performing moments, individual triumphs of youth circus stars, and inspiring tales of leadership, teamwork, and youth empowerment through the vehicle of circus arts.

Aileen Moffitt is the founder of the Prescott Circus Theatre of Oakland, CA, currently in its 27th year. For additional information about the Prescott Circus Theatre, please visit www.prescottcircus.org.

Safety is everyone's business, and needs to be first and foremost in all our minds at all times. There are a couple of myths that need to be debunked regarding safety guidelines standards.

MYTH #1: Safety guidelines stifle creativity.

This couldn't be farther from the truth! As we all need boundaries to work most efficiently in our occupations and daily lives, safety gives us the boundaries within which to work and train most effectively and for the longest time. No training or creativity exists when you are home nursing an injury!

MYTH #2: Stringent safety guidelines make circus arts less fun.

Again, quite the opposite. When you work within a safe framework, you have the ability to work and play with much more concentrated fun and joy, as well as being able to repeat what you do for a much longer time.

But how do we define good safety practice? A great deal of it is common sense. For example, talking through every step of a trick with your partners, spotters and supervisors before actually attempting it is a common-sense, yet often neglected, step in ensuring safety. Even very simple and relatively easy tricks can become dangerous if the participants have different styles or approaches they mistakenly assume their partners share. The clearer the vision is for all involved, while all feet are still solidly on the ground, the safer everyone will be.

Most good safety practices have to come from others with more experience -- or in other words, they must be learned. The AYCO Safety Committee will be working hard to provide more safe practice information in the coming months, as well as workshops at each AYCO event.

While these are not strict standards, here are some general principles to follow:

Upcoming Event

2011 Chicago
Regional Festival -
SAVE THE DATE!

Date: April 10, 2011

Location:
Circesteem,
Chicago, IL

More details to
come! Be sure to
check the "Upcoming
Events" page on the
AYCO website: www.americanyouthcircus.org