

Women's love of teaching fuels cheer academy

Author(s): Joshua Welge Daily Herald Staff Writer

Date: May 2, 2005

Page: 4

Section: Neighbor

Toni Ross is, first and foremost, a teacher.

She wanted to be one - to mold young children's values, show them the difference between right and wrong and help make them better people - ever since she was 4.

But she loves cheerleading.

First she was a gymnast, starting at Naperville North High School and again at North Central College. That's where she caught the cheerleading bug and joined the college's team.

"I loved the sport a little bit too much and wanted to make it a passion," **Ross** said.

She started coaching at Cheer Chicago in Naperville straight out of college five years ago and from there opened her eXtreme All StarZZ Academy of Cheer and Dance in Oswego.

The small venture that started at the Bolingbrook Park District with 20 students and two teams grew to over 200 students with 15 teams.

And, just recently, **Ross** was named one of 20 finalists for the 2005 National Cheerleading Coach of the Year.

"She really puts her heart and soul into the kids," said Rachell Kitchen, whose daughter Kyah has been at eXtreme for three years. "Even though she has eXtreme, and it is a business, she always puts the kids first."

Ross grew up thinking she was going to be a classroom teacher and she still substitute teaches.

She took that idea to college. But when the idea was born that she could teach and pursue her love of cheerleading and dance, she never looked back.

"When I got the opportunity, and found out it was something worthwhile, I jumped at it," she said. "I just fell in love with the sport, the way you could reach children in a positive way outside the classroom. I've loved every minute of it."

Ross graduated from North Central with a degree in elementary education, coached for two years at Cheer Chicago and spent seven years with Naperville Gymnastics as a coach and two as director of its program.

It was when she was involved with the Bolingbrook Park District as its head gymnastics coach that the idea of eXtreme was born.

"I had lot of parental support, but when I first started it was just me," she said. "It was just a little bitty light inside that said it would work."

"I was 23, just getting out of college. My parents thought I was nuts, but they were excited for me."

Extreme started off with basic cheerleading, teaching routines and travel to local competitions. Tumbling, dance and cheerleading classes were offered.

The gym had 20 kids and two competitive teams by the end of its first season, eight teams after the second year, 12 after the third and now has 15 teams competing.

In four years, eXtreme has won 75 National Cheer titles and now offers competitive all-star cheerleading, recreational cheer, competitive dance, tumbling and stunting classes, and individual private instruction for boys and girls age 3 to 18.

"We've grown immensely in what we offer," **Ross** said. "Cheerleading has caught on in the area. More and more kids are opening their eyes to the adventure of the sport. Now it's turned into a very competitive sport and kids understand if they train hard there are opportunities out there for college scholarships."

But **Ross** isn't just interested in teaching young children how to do a cartwheel or hand stand.

She won't tolerate any substance abuse. If a girl or boy is caught drinking or using any drugs, it is one strike and they're out of the program.

Kids turn in their school report cards to **Ross** on a regular basis and must maintain at least a 2.7 grade point average to stay on the team.

"Kids respect my rules, and I respect them for it," she said.

Outside of the gym, kids at eXtreme are heavily involved in community service. This week they will be outside Cold Stone Creamery in Oswego, encouraging patrons to come in the store with monies generated going toward the Make A Wish Foundation.

Ross is also interested in having some of her children go to local food banks, volunteer at nursing homes and get involved in various other fund-raising activities.

Ross also started a special needs cheerleading program at eXtreme for disabled children.

"We don't build cheerleaders here, we're building ethics for life. In my opinion, that's what sports are for," she said. "Cheerleading is great, but you're not going to grow up to be a cheerleader."

Ross takes her kids to three to four national meets a year; most recently, eXtreme took home a national title in New Orleans.

Typically, the kids come in between two and nine hours a week for practice.

And **Ross**?

She'd be at the gym seven days a week, typically coming in at 9 in the morning and walking out the door at 11 at night.

That's not even mentioning her substitute teaching work and coaching the cheerleaders at Plainfield Central High School.

"She can't get more than two hours of sleep," Kitchen said.

"Between coaching here and coaching at the high school, and choreographing routines it's pretty busy - but it pays off," **Ross** said.

"Teaching the love of the sport is what's it all about. When I pass away I want others to carry on that love to future children."