

Now they can fly

From street children to circus performers

by Anne Swardson



Parishioners welcome
Caméléon girls at
Sunday coffee hour

Photo © The American Cathedral in Paris

Once they were abused, homeless and friendless. Now they can fly.

Four girls from the Philippines have spent the year in Paris doing advanced training in circus skills courtesy of *Caméléon*, a French nonprofit association that sheltered and raised them, along with hundreds of other abused children.

The organization was founded by Laurence Ligier after a visit to the Philippines 16 years ago, at the age of 19, galvanized her to

help the many street children she saw. Because Filipina mothers often have to leave the country to work abroad, their children are sometimes left in the care of friends and family - if care, in some cases, is the right word to describe it.

"You see the scars on their legs, you see the marks of cigarettes," Laurence recently told a meeting of people who had sponsored *Caméléon* children. "Some were treated like slaves or dogs, beaten, raped. They have to relearn everything." >>

Since its two home centers were founded, in 1998 and 2006, *Caméléon* has helped 1,400 children and families. More than 120 girls have been sheltered, fed and educated in local public schools. Some 155 have been reintegrated into their families or society, and 23 have finished their studies and found work.

It's a long way from the life they knew among the estimated 1.5 million street children in the Philippines, and the 5 million engaged in child labor.

But it's a start, and *Caméléon* has changed the lives of Joylen, 17, Rowena and Angelica, both 18 and Eufemia, 19. Each has been with *Caméléon* for more than five years, and each has chosen to spend nine months away from their home and country for the chance to enter the circus.

They began with four months with the Zanzibar Circus in Peru, and arrived in Paris in September to train with the *Académie Fratellini*, a world-renowned circus school in Saint-Denis, north of Paris. The American Cathedral is paying some of their expenses as the girls learn trapeze, juggling, unicycle, vaulting and aerial fabric acrobatics.

What's it like?

"We work hard," laughed Joylen.

But the girls have also seen movies, museums and sights, from the Eiffel Tower to Disneyland, often with their Paris sponsors. Among those are Sigun and Joe Coyle, who bring Rowena to church as often as she can get there. Sigun, a member of the Mission & Outreach Committee, learned about *Caméléon* through Cathedral sexton Dennis Mana-ay and brought the organization to the Cathedral's attention.

"This project is the most successful example of M&O's aim of partnering with the people we help. Now that we know these girls well, we will be able to follow their careers and get closer to *Caméléon's* heart than by doing everything long-distance," she says.

The girls have performed in the

Parish Hall, to the delight of the Sunday School children. They have entertained larger audiences too, performing at the Pinder Circus and the GDF Suez Tennis Open, as well as for Air France, *Dassault Systèmes* and UNESCO. And they were featured on France 3's news program in January and France 2's *Envoyé Speciale* in March. They will appear on TF1 in April.

In April they will return to the Philippines and work with 240 girls there who are eager to learn circus skills, and over the summer they'll put on shows and train school children. They hope to be back in France in September.

"The act of using their bodies in sport, in dance, restores them," Laurence said. "It's therapy." ❀

Anne Swardson is chair of the Cathedral's Mission & Outreach Committee and an editor-at-large with Bloomberg News.



Demonstration of circus arts in Cathedral parish hall



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