

Lincoln Elementary School's Unicycle Club provides a way for students to find satisfaction in their abilities, many of them ending up zooming around the gym.



Cycling Lessons

Lincoln Elementary Students Put Perseverance to the Test



BY KATE McDERMOTT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TURNER PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO



IF YOU HAVE EVER TRIED TO GATHER SOME ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS FOR A GROUP PHOTO, YOU KNOW HOW DIFFICULT THAT CAN BE. Consider, then, the struggle in getting 32 students to pose for a photo. Oh, and did we mention they are on unicycles?

Nonetheless, intrepid photographer Jamie Turner somehow manages to herd the many unicyclists into a photo, after taking some risk to get action shots as the students zipped and zagged around him.

But I suspect that Jamie, like me, found it hard to find fear amid such joy. The students of

Lincoln Elementary School's Unicycle Club exhibited so many smiles and so much satisfaction at their abilities that it was hard to do anything but smile—smile at them, and for them.

For many of the children who zoomed around the gym like they were born on unicycles, Lincoln's UNITY Club provides a nice diver-

sion from some of life's tougher realities. Nearly 73 percent of the 614 students at Lincoln Elementary qualify for free or reduced-priced meals. Many face mountains of adversity in their daily lives, including some with homelessness. But for a few hours each week, they prove to themselves that they can indeed overcome challenges.



Students are determined to become proficient, but as one student says, “Even when you keep falling and falling, you’ve got to keep trying. Because like they say, ‘Practice makes perfect.’”

“It’s like the bestest club ever,” says Lincoln third-grader Jake. Although not as proficient, yet, as some of the other club members, Jake is determined to get there. “Even when you keep falling and falling, you’ve got to keep trying. Because like they say, ‘Practice makes perfect.’”

And practice they do. Every Tuesday and Thursday, the club members spend 40 minutes wheeling around the gym. Some are old pros, while others are clearly still getting the feel of balancing on one wheel. But help is never far behind for those who need it. Whether getting an assist from a classmate or from one of the four teachers who supervise the club, there is always lots of encouragement, laughter—and a few falls.

PEDAL POWER

Victoria Cramer is a fifth-grade teacher at Lincoln Elementary and one of the club’s supervisors. When she was given the opportunity to take a spin on a unicycle, she was hooked. “I tried it out and fell in love with it,” she says. “My husband even got me one for my birthday.”

Cramer admits she’s not as skilled on the bike as some of the kids who excitedly weaved around the gym. But as an educator, she sees the unicycles as reinforcing much of what she says to her students in the classroom. “I love to see the kids persevering at this,” she says. “The unicycles are a way to take a physical thing and translate it into an academic mindset.”

That is exactly what Lisa Tucker hoped to achieve. She is an English



language teacher at Lincoln and has spent 30 years with Frederick County Public Schools in different capacities. With support from Lincoln’s principal, Eric Rhodes, she was instrumental in bringing the unicycle club to the school because she understands how succeeding at something as challenging as balancing on one wheel can teach bigger life lessons.

“Unicycles are a great way to demonstrate that the best way to conquer a large task is to set and achieve



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UNItY Club members set their own individual goals for the week when Tuesdays and Thursdays are spent in the gym trying to master the bikes. On Wednesdays the youngsters observe Book Club day.

small, attainable goals,” she says. To reinforce that, UNItY Club members set their individual goals for the week. For some, it might be to get on the unicycle without help, or to pedal backward. For others, it might simply be to stay upright after letting go of the wall for a few seconds.

The goals support what Tucker calls “growth mindsets and the power of yes.” Tuesdays and Thursdays are spent in the gym trying to master the bikes, while Wednesdays are Book Club day, a time when they read and discuss books that demonstrate life lessons of overcoming adversity, persevering, helping others and similar topics.

“Everything we do is aimed at reinforcing these important character skills,” Tucker says. Because when things get tough—whether with their schoolwork or life in general—

the unicycle can be a symbol of what they can accomplish when they don’t quit. “We remind them that most people can’t ride a unicycle because it is hard. But you *can* ride a unicycle. You *can* do hard things,” she adds.

SUPPORT FROM THE TOP

Unicycling is hardly a conventional hobby, but fortunately for the students at Lincoln Elementary, their principal knows a thing or two about unconventional bike riding. Eric Rhodes and his wife, Jeanne, founded Frederick’s popular National Clustered Spires High Wheel Race, which happens to be the only one of its kind in the country.

So, when Tucker mentioned to Rhodes that she’d been riding a unicycle since she was 12, the wheels started spinning, pun intended. “I’m obviously very into cycling,” Rhodes says. “And I’ve tried unicy-

cling. Let me tell you, it is a test of patience, grit and perseverance. Which is exactly what we try to teach our kids, too.”

When Rhodes discovered that unicycling is actually part of school curriculum in Japan, he decided that, with the help of Tucker and Lincoln teachers Carol Williams and Madison Herrmann, they would try to introduce the activity to their students.

They launched a GoFundMe campaign to raise \$1,000 to purchase 26 unicycles. Safe Kids Frederick County donated all the bike helmets and led a session on bike safety and proper helmet fitting, and Bicycle Escape helps maintain the unicycles and provides discounted parts.

As Rhodes watches his students spin around the gym, they are anxious to get his attention so they can demonstrate to him their progress. And he

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The students cheer each other on, regardless of their skill level. They help those who fall or offer a steadying arm.

can't help but beam with pride. "Some are more proficient than I am," he says. That includes Jocelyn, a fifth-grader. One of her weekly goals was to race—and beat—a teacher. She chose Rhodes, who admits the outcome wasn't even close. "She really crushed me," he says.

INSPIRING AND EMPOWERING


The students cheer each other on, regardless of their skill level. They help up those who fall or offer a steadying arm. Or, in the case of one student, help him get out of his wheelchair and onto his specially equipped Cyco Cycle, which is a trike/unicycle hybrid that enables him to participate in the fun, too.

Rhodes says the first time this student tried the cycle, he could hardly complete one rotation of the wheel because he lacked the leg strength to do so. "But now I'm telling him to slow down," Rhodes laughs. But it wasn't long ago that the very same student brought Rhodes to tears. "As part of our awards ceremonies, we do a thing called, 'Who Inspires You?'" Rhodes said. "I shared with the students that this classmate of theirs inspires me. And the next thing I know, he comes riding across the floor on his Cyco Cycle." To say there weren't many dry eyes in the house would be an understatement.

As Lincoln's UNiTy Club celebrates its first anniversary, it has

reached its maximum capacity. Although some students now bring their own unicycles to the club, Rhodes requires a ratio of one adult to every eight students for safety purposes. So, until they have more supervisors, they have to turn away students who would like to join.

Its supporters hope that the club can continue to grow so that they can accommodate every child who would like to participate. Because for three special hours each week, Lincoln students practice critical life skills like how to share and take turns, the importance of patience, and perhaps most importantly, how to fall and get back up.

"I feel really good about what happens here," Tucker says. 



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