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ABOVE: Kaely Michels-Gualtieri performs her aerial act Sunday with Cirque Italia in Manassas. She will spend the rest of the summer with the traveling show. **BETWEEN:** Corissa Fusco, left, applies Michels-Gualtieri's makeup before her act. ■ For photos from her performance, go to [postlocal.com](#).

A District woman returns after learning how to fly

Aerial gymnast wows at circus in Manassas

BY JULIE ZAUZMER

Once upon a time, a little girl from Washington learned how to fly.

Of course, like all fairy tales, it wasn't that simple to complete her quest. She had to practice 10 hours a day, six days a week, for five long years. She had to move halfway around the world as a teenager and learn two new languages in just a couple of months each. She had to face the constant risk of injury and one very real dislocated elbow.

But the hundreds of spectators who watch her in action nowadays know that she completed her quest. Kaely Michels-Gualtieri certainly can fly.

Michels-Gualtieri, 23, has been training as a trapeze artist since she graduated from the Field School in the District in 2007. Although she pursued her education in Italy, France and Canada, her first professional job, as an aerial performer in Cirque Italia, has brought her back home. She joined the show last week in Gaithersburg and is currently doing flips on a swinging bar about 20 feet in the air in Manassas. After that, the show will be in Owings Mills, Md.

A competitive gymnast from a young age, Michels-Gualtieri first tried the trapeze in high school during a two-week internship at a circus in San Francisco. She had plans to study engineering at Wellesley College, but once she got a taste of flight, she wanted more.

A one-year deferral to study circus arts in Italy eventually turned into a permanent choice. Instead of heading from Turin to Wellesley, she moved to Paris, where she entered another circus school. After one year at that school, she auditioned for the Académie Fratellini, one of the world's most prestigious circus



training programs.

After a grueling week-long tryout, Michels-Gualtieri was selected as one of 11 new students out of a pool of more than 200 — the first American ever to enter the school.

"I'm not the strongest, and I'm not the most flexible. It's just that when someone says no, I don't listen," she said. Throughout her schooling, she repeatedly pushed her instructors to let her try more than they had thought her capable of.

She also attributes her success to the background in physics that could have led her to the engineering program at Wellesley. When she considers standing on a bar in midair and then dropping off feet-first, for instance, she first does the math to make sure the bar really will swing with her so she can grab onto it again. Once, a classmate whom Michels-Gualtieri considered a better gymnast balked when they were asked to try a higher trapeze.

"She refused to go higher because she was scared," Michels-Gualtieri recalled. But Michels-Gualtieri knew the physics behind the trick herself: Descending from a higher starting point actually means the performer has more room to maneuver safely without falling to the ground. She attempted it without fear. "I think having a brain

helps you a lot."

Her brains and brashness have served her well. In a field with few job prospects — many of the students she graduated with are unemployed even though they attended one of the best circus schools in the world — Michels-Gualtieri has met with success so far.

She expects her body will put up with the aerial gymnastics only until her late 20s; then, she plans to become a nurse. But her big goal for the years ahead is to join the renowned show Cirque du Soleil.

When she graduated from circus school, she was told she was the first person in line for a job there as soon as one opened up. But since then, she said, the company has cut spots rather than add any. She is still waiting.

And she is enjoying learning the ins and outs of life in the circus — from navigating the visa process for all the countries she might work in to finding a stranger sleeping in her bed when she returns to her caravan for a mid-show costume change. "I really feel like I'm in a movie," she said.

With the smoke machine billowing below her and the spotlight picking her out twisting magically many feet above the awestruck audience, it's no wonder she does.

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