

Falls City big top circus delights crowds

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

FALLS CITY — Miya Altermatt, 9, was surprised when Leo the circus clown picked her from the crowd.

"He wasn't looking at me," she said.

Miya, who lives in Dallas, was selected to help entertain the crowd in Falls City during Wednesday's first show of the Culpepper & Merriweather Circus.

She more than held her own with the practiced professional, who dressed her up in a costume, had her perform goofy stunts

around the circus ring, and falsely accused her of shooting air darts into his backside.

Leo's lucky Miya has a sense of humor — the latter gag was her favorite part of her time in front of the crowd.

"It was funny," she said grinning.

Being selected to be in the act made Miya's first circus all the better. In addition to being a star for a few moments, she was able to ride a pony for the first time in the circus' midway. The trip was supposed to be kept secret from Miya and her younger sister, but the clever 9-year-old knew exactly where they were going.

"It was supposed to be a surprise, but I guessed it," she said.

Spoiling the surprise didn't dampen the experience.

"I love the circus," she said.

Miya wasn't Leo's only victim — ehh, volunteer.

Dallas resident Jessie Markeo also was picked from the crowd to keep the fun going as the circus crew set up the final act, the impressive "Wheel of Destiny."

This time, he was supposed to be the model for Leo's venture into portraiture. Yes, there were a few embarrassing costume changes involved.

Markeo took the ribbing from the crowd — he has family in Falls City — in stride.

"Bringing the circus here is fun. It's good for our community. Some of our kids wouldn't be able to see it otherwise."

—Amy Houghtaling

"I'm happy to play along," Markeo said. "I just figured I would do it with family here. It was really fun. The clown

was really nice."

Wednesday's two shows were a fundraiser for the Falls City Parents Group and Falls City Arts Council. Amy Houghtaling, with the parents group, said ticket sales were on par with when Culpepper & Merriweather came to town two years ago.

Houghtaling said it isn't just the shows and fundraising that makes putting on the circus worth it. She said Culpepper & Merriweather gave away a number of children's tickets for free.

"Bringing the circus here is fun," she said. "It's good for our community. Some of our kids wouldn't be able to see it otherwise."



The finale act Wheel of Destiny has two brave and skilled performers flying almost to the top of the circus tent in — or outside in one case — two adjointed rings. The louder the crowd cheered the faster the rings flew.



Jonathan Morales rides a unicycle on a tightrope.



Leo the circus clown performs during a break with volunteer helper Miya Altermatt.

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