

# FOCUS

East Otter Tail

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## Kids find calm through a mix of yoga and puppetry

“So, everybody. Tell me about your monkeys.”



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“So, everybody. Tell me about your monkeys.”

That’s how Chris Griffith started out his class at Heart of the Lakes Elementary School on Thurs-day. He wasn’t talking about actual monkeys, though – not the hairy primate kind. No, he was talking about ‘mind monkeys’ – those little doubts, anxieties and distractions that rattle about in our heads and make it hard to concentrate or relax.

It’s a yoga concept, made kid-friendly as a part of “Monkey Mind Pirates,” a program that mixes playfulness with mindfulness through a creative combination of yoga, puppetry and music.

At the Perham elementary school, the program consisted of a week-long afternoon workshop for a group of third and fourth grade students. In class, they made puppets, learned yoga-inspired methods of “finding calm,” and rehearsed for a live performance held Friday at the Perham High School Auditorium.

They performed to a packed house.

Led by Z Puppets Rosenschnoz, a puppetry company based in Minneapolis, “Monkey Mind Pirates” is one of seven different shows currently touring as part of an educational arts initiative made possible by the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund. It also was supported locally by the New York Mills Cultural Center. In an interview last week, Griffith, of Z Puppets, and his coworker, Shari Aronson, said they have enjoyed their time at Heart of the Lakes. The pair of teacher/puppeteers, along with their three-piece band of musicians/actors and a 14-foot-tall pirate ship (a stage prop for the show), have traveled all over the state to work with kids for this and similar programs.

“We have a really good group of kids here,” Griffith said of the Perham students. “Their enthusiasm is contagious.”

“And this really is an amazing school,” he added. “This is clearly a school where the staff is happy and the principal is very engaged and supportive.”

“Monkey Mind Pirates” tells the tale of a sea captain’s quest of the legendary Waters of Calm. As the captain sets sail, he confronts stressors common to children — each represented by a different puppet, an unruly Monkey Mind Pirate (anxiety, for example, is represented by the puppet Lady Bronte). These pirates wreak havoc aboard the ship – until the captain discovers some basic principles of yoga, which help him manage stress and regain peace.

Along the way there's plenty of humor, music and family-friendly fun.

"This is a way to engage kids' imaginations with yoga," said Aronson. "They really take to it. They go home and use the lingo."

Griffith said one of the main purposes of the program is to give kids and families a language with which to talk about life's stresses, as well as tools to help them quiet down, listen, and observe what's going on around them. Every day of the workshop, the kids would participate in some yoga-inspired breath control techniques and choreography, games and creative play, singing, and relaxation exercises.

Yoga with kids is different than yoga with adults, Griffith explained, as it's "much less about sit-ting still." The kids will be squirmy, but as long as they're having fun, they'll remember what they've learned. Z Puppets Rosenschnoz premiered "Monkey Mind Pirates" in 2010. The soundtrack has received critical acclaim and has earned two awards from Creative Child magazine. The company has received national recognition for its family comedies, including grants from the Jim Henson Foundation and the Puppeteers of America.