

'Super-bendy' Ajax dancer going to circus school

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AJAX -- Holly Makarchuk is beyond flexible. She's "super bendy," able to twist and stretch her body into astonishing positions.

And while most would wince to see her lay on her stomach and bring her feet up to her ears, imagining how painful it must be, the 17-year-old Ajax High School student says it actually feels great.

"I love it," she says. "It feels very good on my back and body. I love stretching and the way people look at you and go, 'that's so cool.'"

A dancer for most of her life, her specialty is acro, specifically contortion. When she first saw Cirque du Soleil contortionists her immediate thought was, 'I want to be up there doing that.'

She's going to the National Circus School in Montreal this month, where she'll train for eight hours a day as she pursues a dream to be a Cirque Du Soleil performer.

"I was screaming at home (when I found out)," she says. "I'm so excited to go, to meet other people and learn more things in contortion."

Most young people listen to

popular music, but Holly regularly plays music from Cirque routines, often getting perplexed 'what is this' queries from friends. But maybe not from best friend Juliann Morrison of Pickering, Holly's dance partner, who also excels in contortion.

"We're both super bendy and we get along so well," Holly says. "On the beach we'll be doing things and people will come up to us."

While she did commercials and had small parts in movies when she was little, Holly's overwhelming obsession has always been dance.

"Before she actually took lessons, she was always dancing," says her mother, Donna Makarchuk, who adds it's not uncommon to hear a thump-

thump sound coming from Holly's room in the evening as she practises hand-stands against the wall.

Holly showed up at the Denise Lester Dance Academy when she was two, a year younger than most kids start there. She proved she belonged and has been dancing

there ever since.

She started off in ballet and, while it's hard to believe, recalls a time when she was "horrible at acro" and "couldn't do anything." One summer she decided she had to do better, enlisting an aunt and former dancer who is also very flexible to work with her until Holly began to excel.

She comes from a family of dancers, noting her aunts all danced at Denise Lester's academy, which is a second home to her. Now Holly's a teacher there, helping her acro teacher, Tammy Anderson, with classes.

Anderson says Holly has the great combination of being both very talented and a hard work-

er, noting at competitions she's received awards such as Teacher's Dream and Destined to be in Cirque.

"She puts so much into it and is also so pleasant," she says. "All the little kids really look up to her. I'm really excited for her because I think she really deserves this. As talented as she is, she's not conceited. She's very modest about her-

self and her skill."

As part of the application process for circus school, Anderson choreographed a solo for Holly that showed her abilities. Forty people were accepted into

the program, which receives up to 300 applications from around the world. She'll be there for two intense weeks, majoring in contortion, balancing and Chinese pole.

"It'll be tough, but it'll be worth it," Holly says. "It'll make me a better dancer."

Chinese pole, especially, "is going to be hard," Holly says. Vertical poles on which performers climb, slide and hold poses, the marquee trick on the apparatus is "the flag," which sees the performer hang horizontally from the pole.

But she's excited to try it and Holly says she loves being challenged.

An honour roll student currently sporting a roughly 90 per cent average ("not my best," she says), Holly is very active in school in student council, the business club, leadership council and athletic association.

She has a parallel dream, to be a lawyer, and would like to attend Harvard one day.

But that dream might have to take second place to a career as a super-bendy contortionist.

"I love performing and making people happy," Holly says.

