



March-April 2007

Traditions

Cartwheels and Somersaults

Fun for the Family at Ruby's Tumbling

The spacious, whitewashed room is a blur of activity as tiny bodies hurl themselves through space toward balance beams, ladders, tunnels, hanging rings and the trampoline. This is an irresistible indoor play space, and best of all, the floor is padded from corner to corner, so it's perfect for a cushioned hop, skip and jump, not to mention a forward roll or two.



Initial impressions of this hectic whirlwind—2-year-old tornadoes on a tear—gradually reveal a carefully choreographed, gently controlled chaos. And a lot of happy energy. Welcome to Ruby's Tumbling (2451 Santa Clara Ave., 510-337-0846) where, for more than 15 years, the children of Alameda have come to bounce and climb, build new skills, make new friends and, in the process, discover themselves as physical and social beings.

It is a rare child in Alameda who has not spent time with Ruby. Ruby Gama, that is. She, along with her teaching partner and daughter Gigi Soto, has touched the lives of literally thousands of kids in the community through classes offered for kids 1 to 9 years old.

Gama knows firsthand that not every child has this kind of opportunity. She grew up poor in the Brooklyn projects and eagerly took advantage of free recreational programs provided by the neighborhood community center, which was a sheltering respite from the rough streets. It was there that she was first introduced to tumbling and gymnastics. Years later, at Alameda Junior College, she revisited her childhood love of movement and, determined to pass on her passion, trained as a physical education teacher.

Gama put her career plans on hold and was a contented stay-at-home mom until her daughters, Gigi and Tracy, joined the Alameda Gymnastics Team. Gama began teaching for the team as a way

to defray costs. When her girls graduated from Alameda High, she launched her own gymnastics business—but one with a big twist: Ruby's Tumbling is not about competition; instead, it is about learning and fun.

Because her program is unique, welcoming even pre-walkers, she has built tremendous loyalty among families looking for a developmentally appropriate physical and social experience for their children. Gama, a petite powerhouse at 54, marries feisty East Coast vitality with wiry strength, honed by hours of leading classes, to create a stimulating, encouraging environment that draws tumblers from not only Alameda, Berkeley and Oakland, but as far away as San Francisco, Hercules and Pleasanton.

Soto was happy to join her mother's venture, carrying on the family teaching tradition, and values the relaxed strategy designed to build tumbling abilities. "We want kids to have fun; it's not about shows or performances."

Training can start early at Ruby's, with young gymnasts exploring how their bodies work and grow and learning about their social world by climbing ladders, walking balance beams, swinging from hand rings, crawling through tunnels and cheering on new pals. Even the youngest students learn about the importance of stretching. The goal is to build a foundation for a lifetime of healthy habits, but Ruby's also instructs in priceless life lessons: taking turns, patience and sharing, for instance.

"We want our students to learn cooperation, increase flexibility, strength and self-confidence and to know that through progression, higher skills and goals can be reached," Gama says.

Moms Jane Grimaldi and Belinda Davis have seen their fair share of tumbling tykes—five between the two of them—through Ruby's. They love the positive approach and are convinced tumbling is invaluable for encouraging body awareness and coordination. They also say Ruby's offers a great bonding opportunity for new moms as well as for the kids. But dads and grandparents are also involved in Ruby's classes. Kevin Schaefer relishes his class time with daughter Claire, who is following in big sister Sophie's footsteps. "It is a challenge for them to develop coordination and do strength training. It's pretty cool," he says. And Nick Khadder appreciates a safe setting where his son Jay can expend energy and build confidence.

Lou Bacca first encountered Ruby's Tumbling in 1992 as he wheeled a grandchild past the studio window. At 62, he was soon running and jumping on the mat with the kids and acquired quite a reputation for his enthusiastic involvement. Visiting dads would declare, "You're the guy. My wife keeps telling me, 'If that ol' geezer can come down, you can come down, too.'"

Ruby's fans include the older kids, too: Manual Perrone, 9, a Ruby's tumbler for two years, loves learning new tricks, especially "cartwheels on the balance beam." Lauren Bacca, a Ruby's Tumbling graduate and student at Alameda High, says her experience was "Hecka fun. It got me ready for dancing, and I made good friends. I was excited to go every time."

With all this enthusiasm, it's no wonder Ruby's Tumbling has evolved into an honored family

ritual for thousands of Alameda children. Gama is humble and grateful. Her impoverished childhood continues to motivate her. “I don’t take anything for granted. It could have easily gone the other way. I hope children who come to my gym leave with smiles on their faces, having learned something and feeling good about themselves.” And she is well on the way to achieving her vision.

—By Noelle Robbins