

## A Modern Version of Running Away and Joining the Circus: From Inner City to Around the World

Jessica Hentoff



Sidney “Iking” Bateman soaring over his circus troupe-mates. Photo: James Cole, 2007.

Circus has always been about defying the most basic rule we live under: the law of gravity. In circus, humans fly through the air and manipulate objects with powerful disregard of this most basic law. In the branch of circus called social circus, participants defy even more than that. In social circuses like Circus Harmony in the United States, Zip Zap Circus in South Africa, and Phare Circus in Cambodia, any notion of social circus being an outlier, somehow less legitimate than its mainstream professional counterpart, is being turned upside down (circus style) as these social circuses foster innovative new circus artists who also defy society’s low expectations of people from their neighbourhoods and backgrounds. This is the story of one of them.

I am the artistic/executive director of Circus Harmony, a nonprofit social circus based in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. I started this work when I founded the St. Louis Arches youth circus troupe in 1989. Circus Harmony is located inside the iconoclastic tourist attraction, City Museum, in downtown St. Louis. We use social circus to help young people overcome not only gravity but also labels and other limitations placed on them by society. We give children the power to define themselves. In circus, you can hang by your toes, or you can’t. You can juggle five clubs, or they hit the ground. Where you live doesn’t matter. Race doesn’t matter. Your parents don’t matter. You matter. You can’t do a pyramid alone. Even solo acts require support on some level. You have to trust and be responsible

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**Jessica Hentoff** has been teaching and performing circus arts for over forty years. She is the artistic/executive director of Circus Harmony, where she uses circus arts and her vision to build character and community and help children defy gravity, soar with confidence, and leap over social barriers.

for others. Individuals matter. The group matters. By standing on each other's shoulders, they can all reach new heights.

Statistics for youth living in inner-city St. Louis are staggeringly negative. According to an FBI crime report, St. Louis has recently been named the second most violent city in America and the number one city for murders (FOX 2 NOW 2017). Almost 12% of high-schoolers in the city will drop out of school this year. Just under half (40%) of children under 18 live in poverty, 70% of them live in high poverty areas regardless of their families' actual income, and 16% of children are homeless. (Missouri KIDS Count 2017) The most common racial or ethnic group living below the poverty line is African American (Data USA 2017). Feelings of insecurity from high murder rates and poverty are further aggravated by lack of trust in law enforcement. Of numerous high profile cases of young African American men killed by police officers around the country, many have been in St. Louis, spurring reactions of betrayal, fear, and outrage (Byers 2017; Berman, Lowery, and deGrandpre 2017). If you are an urban, St. Louis African American male and you stay in your neighbourhood and avoid getting killed, your future could still be bleak. Your employment options are limited, as represented by the fact that the median income of households with children is low at \$33,165 per year (Missouri KIDS Count 2017). High academic standing or sports offer a couple of ways out of these neighbourhoods and out of the cycle, but sports spots are limited, and decent academic standing is hard to achieve in failing schools. The state of St. Louis public schools and their accreditation problems are well documented: they were reaccredited in 2017 after a decade of having this badge of adequacy stripped from them (Taketa 2017).

As described by Cirque du Monde, "social circus is an innovative social intervention approach, which uses the circus arts as a tool for fostering the personal and social development of at-risk individuals" (Lafortune 2013). In this spirit, Circus Harmony creates circus troupes of children from different backgrounds as an approach to addressing the serious social issue of deep-rooted racial/cultural fear and distrust. Circus Harmony students come from both urban and suburban neighbourhoods and a wide variety of socioeconomic and other backgrounds. Being in a circus troupe together, the young people get to know each other and are put in a position of communicating with and trusting each other. They learn that they are more alike than they are different. They create awe-inspiring shows that are presented to the public. The shows demonstrate to people what is possible when we concentrate on what unites us instead of what divides us. Some of the students go on to use circus to take a different path and create a life that takes them totally out of their neighbourhoods and away from the norm of anyone they grew up with. Circus becomes their way out of a neighbourhood where walking to the store can be dangerous and life options are limited. Of Circus Harmony's inner-city students who have used circus arts to change their lives, many even choose not to stay with their families when they come back to St. Louis to visit. They still come home to visit their relatives and, often, have been supporting them from the road. But their sense of family and community is larger now and they stay with other people.



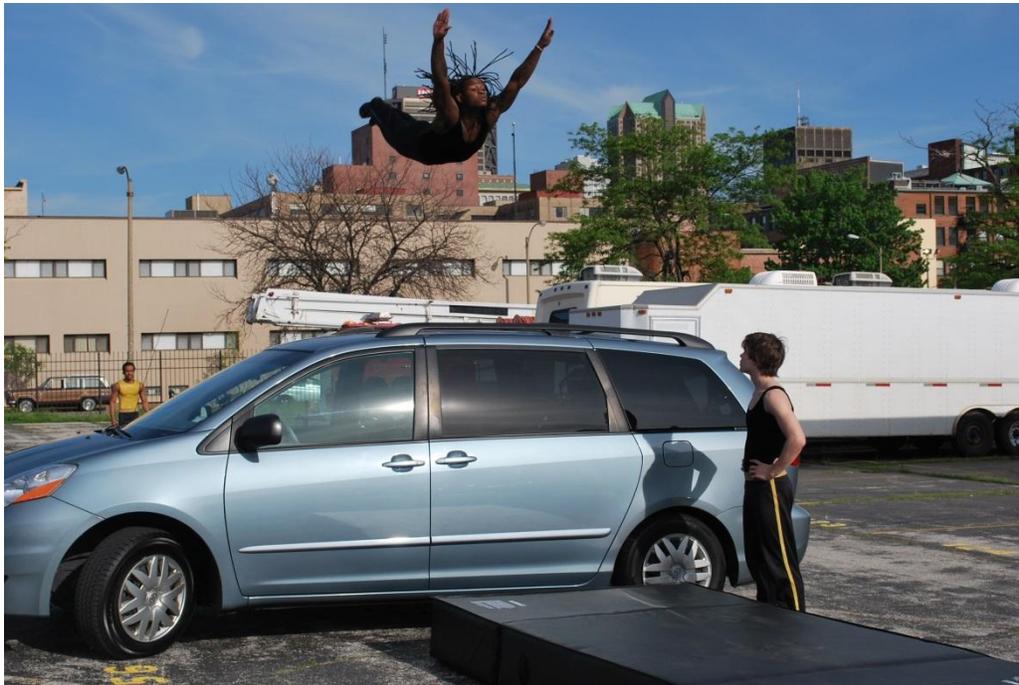
Sidney “Iking” Bateman and Terrance “T-Roc” Robinson. Photo: Jessica Hentoff, 2011.

Certainly part of what defines our work as a social circus has to do with who the participants are. There is no question that when circus classes are offered to people in marginalized situations, they are labelled social circus because the activity is being offered for the reason of giving participants a positive alternative to the personal and social situations they happen to be in. It is meant to go deeper than just teaching someone to juggle. Social circus teaches both circus skills and life skills. Circus Harmony specifically helps and supports young people as they develop in all aspects of their lives: physical, mental, emotional, and social. The intention is for the circus activity to be a bridge to take the participant from one point in their personal and/or social life to another. Increasingly, for some in dire circumstances, it can also create an actual way out of their situation.

Sidney “Iking” Bateman never knew his father. His mother died when he was three and Iking was raised by his illiterate grandmother, who was also raising some of her own children as well as Iking’s siblings and some cousins. His home was in one of the worst neighbourhoods in St. Louis, characterized by low income, high crime, low-level public schools, and high unemployment. At the age of fourteen, Iking was the oldest male in his household who was not dead or institutionalized. Through a mentoring program, he was introduced to Circus Harmony. Iking told *Spectacle Magazine*:

I come from a really troubled neighborhood where there are a lot of gangs and violence and so many negative things and all the odds are really stacked against you. So Circus Harmony gave me a place of comfort because most of the time I didn't feel safe at home. Circus Harmony was basically my escape. Like I was there so much that I didn't have time to run in the streets and hang out with the wrong people because circus consumed so much of my time. It changed my life in so many ways. (Campbell 2017)

Iking was a naturally talented tumbler. At circus, he says, he gained other skills: "I learned how to trust, respect, teamwork, and focus" (Circus Harmony 2015). Most importantly, he was given the opportunity to follow a circus career path and the means to do so. He auditioned and was accepted into the prestigious École Nationale de Cirque (ENC) in Montreal. Numerous members of his St. Louis circus community helped raise the money necessary for him to attend (Circus Harmony 2015).



Sidney "Iking" Bateman soaring over a car. Photo: Jessica Hentoff, 2011.

At Iking's National Circus School graduation show, when he delivered the prescribed short address to the audience before his circus act, this is what he said:

What do you see when you look at me? Fear? Weakness? A not-so-confident person? No! You see a strong, confident, and fearless young man. I come from a place where values are so screwed up that you don't know right from wrong. A place where any a risk could be the last risk you ever take. I wondered if I should take the risk, leaving behind everything that I was told and start over as a new person. I took that risk and jumped into this new world not knowing what to expect! My work is not just a reflection of myself as a person; it's a reflection of my life. All the pain, the hurt, and the disbelief combined to show you that a bad situation can be recreated into something good. Tonight I will take that risk for me and for you. (Rankin 2014)

After graduation, Iking went on to tour the world for two years alongside Melvin Diggs, another Circus Harmony/ENC graduate, with the Montreal-based contemporary circus company 7 Doigts de la Main (The 7 Fingers). The duo performed an acrobatic hoop diving act they created as their graduation presentation from ENC. It depicts the many doors they had to go through to escape their lives in St. Louis. The soundtrack for the act is an interview with the young men recorded in June of 2014. Iking and Melvin talk about growing up African American in St. Louis and waiting to be the next person killed or arrested. They talk about how people they know could be great, but few people are able to fare better and actually get out of the neighbourhood. It was created prior to Mike Brown being shot in Ferguson, Missouri, later that same summer. The act accompanied by this soundtrack has now been seen from Argentina to Russia, by way of France, Spain, Germany, and Turkey. It was also presented as part of a special show in St. Louis titled *Defying Gravity and Social Injustice* (Hentoff 2017). Circus has helped Iking and Melvin to become accomplished circus artists, serve as role models to other youth and, importantly, support their families in St Louis.



Sidney “Iking” Bateman and Melvin Diggs with the author at the Opening of 7 Doigts de la Main/The 7 Fingers’ *Cuisine and Confessions*. Photo: Courtesy Jessica Hentoff, 2014.

Observing Circus Harmony, circus researcher Helizete Da Silva Rodrigues Avrillon wrote,

To my understanding, the purpose of the social circus is not to transform youth, particularly those in at-risk neighborhoods, into contortionists, clowns, trapeze artists, etc. but to teach life lessons, like Circus Harmony’s theme of “teaching the art of life through circus education.” From what I have observed, when you give youth the opportunities to develop and become aware of their capacities—both physical and intellectual—and offer them programs that open new doors, giving them the possibility of interacting with society in a

positive way, they can become contributors to society instead of “social cases” living in at-risk situations. (Da Silva Rodrigues 2011)

Other Circus Harmony graduates have become electricians, schoolteachers or other more mainstream jobs. The life lessons and experiences gained through being part of Circus Harmony’s social circus program have helped them to live better lives than many of their neighbourhood peers. They have learned job-readiness, goal-setting, and interpersonal skills. They are confident and comfortable with people of different backgrounds in a variety of settings. They have experienced being valued members of a community, and this has helped them as they move forward as adults.

Through Circus Harmony, Iking took his first plane trip in 2005 to attend an American Youth Circus Festival. In 2007, 2008, and 2010, he was part of a Peace Through Pyramids social circus partnership with a Jewish/Arab youth circus in Israel. Many members of his family have never been out of St. Louis, much less out of the country. Being part of this social circus gave Iking a world perspective he had not had before. In his words, “travelling the world and seeing how big the world is puts everything in perspective” (Circus Harmony 2015). Watching social circus can have a similar impact on audiences. Rabbi Marc Rosenstein of the Galilee Foundation for Value Education, who invited Circus Harmony to Israel, made this observation after a show by the combined troupes of the St. Louis Arches and the Galilee Circus: “I think many who saw the shows felt the same tears in their eyes, maybe out of the feeling one is seeing a vision of something that we all long for . . . the total obliteration of barriers, whether social, economic or gravitational” (Lipsitz 2011).

There is a book about Circus Harmony’s Peace Through Pyramids partnership with the Jewish/Arab Galilee Circus in Israel. In English, the title is *Watch Out for Flying Kids*. The book has just been translated into Japanese and is being used in a number of Japanese middle schools. The title in Japan is *Jumping the Wall*. Iking is someone who made it over the wall by jumping through the right hoops. In December of 2017, Iking joined Cirque du Soleil as an acrobatic hoop diver on their show, *Luzia*. In this modern version of the classic story, this young man ran away and joined the circus and found a new home.

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