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Circus Harmony helps children, promotes social change

Cirque du Soleil benefits Circus Harmony

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ST. LOUIS — From Israel to Ferguson, Mo., nonprofit Circus Harmony's young acrobats perform for social change.

St. Louis' own Circus Harmony made international headlines when its youth circus performers were stranded in Israel this summer at the height of the Gaza conflict. The young acrobats were in Israel as part of Circus Harmony's Peace Through Pyramids program with the Jewish/Arab Galilee Circus, a program they have been doing since 2007. Just a few days after the young circus artists returned to St. Louis, the situation in Ferguson exploded in the aftermath of black teenager, Mike Brown, being killed by a white police officer.

"It seems that Peace Through Pyramids is needed as much in St. Louis as it is in Israel," Circus Harmony artistic director Jessica Hentoff said. "We are a social circus which means they use circus arts to promote social change by building character in individuals and bridges between communities. Of the 600 children we work with in the St. Louis metropolitan area, over 70 percent are considered at-risk youth residing throughout the St. Louis metropolitan area."

Circus Harmony funds their work through grants, private donations, and performances by their acclaimed acrobatic troupe, the St. Louis Arches, as well as classes at City Museum, Raintree School and elsewhere. The Regional Arts Commission has chosen Circus Harmony to be a recipient of its inaugural Social Impact grants.

Through a Social Impact grant, Circus Harmony is going to take the children who went to Israel to Ferguson to present their Peace Through Pyramids program to the children of the embattled North St. Louis County city, providing a starting point for creating a youth circus troupe in the Ferguson community.

In addition, Cirque du Soleil is returning to St. Louis with "Varekai" Wednesday, Jan. 7, through Sunday, Jan. 11, at Chaifetz Arena and has selected Circus Harmony to be a benefit partner because of their work with youth at risk. Cirque du Soleil donates tickets to organizations providing assistance to youth at risk with 100 percent of the profits from ticket sales supporting those organizations' work with young people.

For the Friday, Jan. 9, performance of "Varekai" at Chaifetz Arena, if circus-goers buy a benefit ticket through Circus Harmony, 100 percent of the ticket sales will directly support Circus Harmony's Flying Children Scholarship Fund. People who buy the benefit tickets also will receive a ticket to see the Jan. 24 performance of Circus Harmony's new show, "Guibilante!"

The benefit tickets are available only through Circus Harmony, from where benefit tickets must be purchased in order for the proceeds to go to its Flying Children Scholarship Fund. Tickets are now available at www.circusharmony.org or by calling 314-436-7676.

Circus Harmony teaches the art of life through circus education. Its teachers work to build character and expand community for youth of all ages, cultures, abilities and backgrounds. Through the teaching and performing of circus arts, the organization helps people defy gravity, soar with confidence, and leap over social barriers, all at the same time.

Circus Harmony is St. Louis' only social circus organization as well as its only complete circus school. Social circus means using the teaching and performing of circus arts to motivate social change. Circus Harmony is both an arts education and a youth development organization. By inspiring individuals and connecting communities with its circus education and entertainment programs, it has a positive impact on the St. Louis area and beyond.

Circus Harmony presents youth circus shows and runs a year-round circus school at the City Museum. It also offers numerous outreach classes throughout the St. Louis metropolitan area, teaching more than 600 children a year, more than 70 percent from low-income families. Circus Harmony's youth circus troupes include children of a variety of different backgrounds: Jewish and Christian; Caucasian, Latino, African-American and Asian-American; inner city and suburban. In the same spirit of diversity, the organization has collaborated with a Jewish/Arab youth circus in Israel since 2007.

Circus Harmony's organizers promote cooperation and communication as the path to peace. "Teaching children from different neighborhoods how to stand on each other's shoulders may seem like a strange way to take this path, but it works for us," Hentoff said. "Circus Harmony promotes peace through pyramids, joy through juggling and harmony through handsprings."

Circus Harmony is home of famed youth circus troupe, the St. Louis Arches, Ringling's youngest-ever female human cannonball and one of the Flying Wallendas. It has alumnae touring the world with various circuses and also working in St. Louis as electricians and teachers. "We train our students to be successful in circus and in life," Hentoff noted. Visit www.circusharmony.org/cirque-du-soleil for more information on the special Cirque du Soleil performance of "Varekai," Friday, Jan. 9, to benefit Circus Harmony.

Circus Harmony provided information for this article.