



Circus Harmony Coming to Fractious Ferguson

By Nat Hentoff This article appeared on Cato.org on December 31, 2014.

creasingly known throughout the United States and abroad, the “Circus Lady” – the founder, executive and artistic director of St. Louis-based Circus Harmony – “has a long history of building bridges,” as St. Louis Public Radio’s Linda Lockhart reports (“Reactions to Grand Jury’s Decision Reflect Diversity of Perspectives,” Linda Lockhart, stlpublicradio.org, Nov. 25).

“Over the past 10 years,” Lockhart writes, “she has developed youth circus troupes that consist of Jewish, Christian, Caucasian, Hispanic, African-American and Asian children from throughout the St. Louis area.” And, the Circus Lady “has gone all the way to Israel,” where this past summer, she “took members of her tumbling group, the St. Louis Arches.

“There, the Arches joined with Arab and Israeli youth from the Galilee Circus, where they work and learned together, setting aside religious, political and cultural differences.”

This Circus Lady is Jessica Hentoff, my daughter. I have written about her and her involvement in Circus Harmony before – my interest as a reporter going far beyond parental pride, which certainly does exist.

“I’m following in your footsteps,” she once said to me.

But I haven’t traveled an inch near the life-changing effect she has had on the members of her circus troupes.

The mission of the nonprofit Circus Harmony is clear: “Through teaching and performance of circus arts, we help people defy gravity, soar with confidence, and leap over social barriers, all at the same time”

(circusharmony.org/about).

As she has explained to me and others: “Children involved in Circus Harmony learn how to defy gravity, becoming part of a creative team, and how to overcome the prejudices society places upon them because of race, religion or socioeconomic standing.

“Our programs teach valuable life skills like perseverance, focus and teamwork. Learning circus with others teaches trust responsibility and cooperation.

“Perhaps the most important experience we give our participants is the opportunity to meet with and interact with children from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds than their own.

“Many children live under certain labels imposed on them because they are a certain race or from a particular neighborhood. Our students learn to define themselves as capable community members and creative performing artists ... the circus has given them confidence and the courage to be themselves.”

When Circus Harmony starts a troupe in Ferguson, Missouri, in February (funded in part by a social impact grant from the St. Louis Regional Arts Commission), the Circus Lady intends to have her experienced students take charge of teaching their new associates.

“The kids,” she tells the (St. Louis) Riverfront Times, “are more responsive to a lesson taught by a peer, especially an accomplished peer” (“After Performing for Peace in Israel, Circus Harmony Brings Message of Unity to Ferguson,” Lindsay Toler, Riverfront Times, Dec. 23).

Here is her initial program for Ferguson: “The series of circus workshops will include children aged 8 to 18 in acrobatics, juggling and balancing arts ... and then engage audiences in their neighborhoods and beyond in something innovative, inspiring and positive. In light of recent events in Ferguson, this will be meaningful for the participants, their audiences and the entire St. Louis community.”

And dig this from the Circus Lady’s approach to teaching there: “We will monitor students’ circus progress through use of our circus log books and personal interviews. We will be able to see if they learn to juggle, do a back handspring or balance a feather in the circus classes.”

As for the Circus Lady’s background, according to her biography, “Jessica Hentoff has been involved in circus arts since 1973. She has toured with numerous circuses throughout the United States and Canada performing as an aerialist, clown, juggler, bareback-rider, small animal trainer and fire-eater. Jessica has taught circus skills to

children and adults of all ages and levels for over 30 years (including deaf children, adolescents with Down Syndrome and children with all labels)” (everydaycircus.net).

She was the St. Louis Arts and Education Council’s 2009 Arts Innovator of the Year, and she has been a speaker on the topic of social circus at the World Circus Federation/European Circus Association symposium. Among her grants: The National Endowment for the Arts.

In an interview with the publication St. Louis Jewish Light, Hentoff talked about how the idea of “tikkun olam” within the Jewish religion is connected with circus:

“This is the concept that the world shattered into a million pieces years ago. It is our job, as humans, to repair the world. My theory is that everyone uses their own kind of glue. Some use music or theater or medicine or journalism. I use circus” (“A life in circus,” Ellen Futterman, St. Louis Jewish Light, Feb. 6, 2009).

In a 2007 Washington Times story I wrote about the circus’s trip to Israel, Jessica Hentoff quoted a member of the Arches as saying “that he doesn’t know which kids (he works with) are Arabs and which kids are Jewish. It doesn’t matter. We are all circus performers, and we are creating something together, which is inspirational in ways the kids don’t even think about” (my article, “Galilee Circus breaks down barriers,” The Washington Times, Aug. 20, 2007).

Adds the Circus Lady: “Learning to fly helps children believe in themselves ... It changes people’s perceptions of them.”

When I’m working on a civil liberties story, or any kind of story, and give my name, the response can be: “Oh, are you the father of the Circus Lady?”