

Traveling circus

By Ellen Futterman, Editor | Posted: Wednesday, July 30, 2014 2:18 pm



Peace through Pyramids

At top, Ari Maayan, center, is flanked by his parents and grandparents, upon his return Tuesday after three weeks of performing with the Galilee Arches in Israel. From left to right are his grandfather, Rabbi Jeffrey Stiffman; mother, Cheryl Maayan; father, Jon Maayan and grandmother, Arlene Siffman.

There's an old song that goes, "How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm/After they've seen Patee." Written following the end of World War I, its lyrics speak to the young men returning to rural America after fighting overseas.

For some reason, I kept thinking about that song while waiting at Lambert-St. Louis International Airport for the nine youngsters from Circus Harmony's St. Louis Arches to return home Tuesday morning after an unexpectedly extended three-week stint performing aerial, acrobatic and other circus-like activities in Israel.

While there, the troupe's members were hosted by both Jewish and Arab families, and performed with Jewish and Arab children who are part of the Israel's Galilee Circus. The merged American-Israeli Galilee Arches, whose young members are Muslim, Jewish and Christian, try to perform together in either St. Louis or Israel every other year. This was the third contingent of St. Louis youngsters to perform in the Jewish State since the relationship with the Israeli troupe began in 2007.

Obviously, these talented, young St. Louisans are not war vets and none, as near as I could tell, live on a farm. But they had been in a country where war now rages, and I wondered how they had been affected. As I stood with their parents and other relatives and friends waiting for their United Airlines flight to arrive, I found myself getting caught up in the excitement — and emotion — of the homecoming.

It was hard not to. They were supposed to return to St. Louis almost a week earlier but the temporary ban on U.S. carriers flying in and out of Tel Aviv put the kibosh on that plan.

According to Circus Harmony executive director Jessica Hentoff, who was chaperoning them along with two other adults, the group never heard any sirens or had to take cover at any point during their visit. Most of the time, they stayed with families living in the Jewish and Arab villages in Israel's northern Galilee region. "Circus Mother" Hentoff kept the families in St. Louis informed through a daily blog and numerous Facebook postings and pictures.

When the group learned it could not leave Israel, host families were eager to extend their hospitality. Hentoff blogged how none of the kids, who ranged in age from 10 to 20, wanted to leave, and even "begged" her to let them stay longer. As it turned out, Israelis donated food and activities to the group, and Hentoff was able to book additional shows for the Galilee Arches to perform.

Among those in the welcome home delegation Tuesday were Rabbi Jeffrey Stiffman and his wife Arlene. Two of the Stiffman's grandchildren, Maya Zuckerman, 15, and Ari Maayan, 14, were among the nine returning St. Louis Arches.

"I've been very nervous the whole time they were gone," admitted Arlene Stiffman. Her daughter, Cheryl Maayan, who is the head of the Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School, also said she had been nervous, even though she had visited her son, Ari, and niece, Maya, a couple of weeks earlier while in Israel for an educator's conference.

"When I was there, I was in areas (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv) where there were sirens," said Maayan. "Then I went to where the kids were in the Galilee. I had heard on the news that there was rioting in Arab villages but I drove in and it was totally peaceful. The people in the village were all connected to the circus and had good relationships with Jewish families in the region. It was like being in a little pocket of peace."

Maayan stayed for a few days with the Muslim family who was hosting her niece. "The host mom and I have become Facebook friends and we send messages in Hebrew back and forth," said Maayan. "She told me that she hopes I can come back one day and this insufferable situation will be over and we can sit in peace."

Maayan also said that the host mom is a teacher in the Arab village of Karmi'el. "We're hoping our schools can make some kind of connection in the coming school year," Maayan added. Both she and her sister, Marti Zuckerman, explained that while their children were in a region considered relatively safe, having them in a war-torn country with rockets flying overhead was more than a little stressful.

That sentiment was echoed by many others waiting by the entrance to the A Gates. Nearly all made it a point to praise Hentoff for keeping in close contact and letting those back home know their children were safe.

Finally, at roughly 9:45 a.m., the nine youngsters and three adults came walking down the gate area, looking a bit weary after a full day of traveling (from Tel Aviv to Newark, then to St. Louis), but smiling nonetheless. TV and radio reporters (and me) were ready to pounce as parents and children hugged and kissed and hugged and kissed some more. Some even cried.

Mark Wheeler, who will be a sophomore at Whitfield School, called the trip a "life changing experience." His mother, grandmother, two aunts and a cousin stood by as Mark explained how he couldn't wait another two years for the Israeli Galilee Circus kids to come to St. Louis so that they could all perform together again here.

Ari Maayan said he was “excited to get stuck” for an additional week in Israel. “We became great friends with the kids there so I was excited to have more time with them, to bond even more,” said Ari, who is a unicyclist and attends Crossroads College Preparatory School. “It really wasn’t scary at all over there. I felt pretty safe. It didn’t really feel like a war was going on.”

Even 10-year-old Lilly Bowman, the youngest of the St. Louis Arches, said she didn’t get the least bit homesick and loved her time away as her three younger siblings clung to her.

Hentoff couldn’t thank the Jewish Federation of St. Louis enough for its generosity in providing financial support. She said each trip “gets better and better” because of the caliber of talent from the kids both in St. Louis and in Israel.

She also said the profound lesson the Galilee Arches teach the world “are the possibilities when you focus on what connects you rather than what separates you. Through circus, these amazing young people showed us how Arabs, Jews and Christians can work together for a common good and in friendship.”

Maya Zuckerman concurred. Though she is Jewish, she said her Muslim host family treated her as if she was one of their own. She also said she loved the food they served her, including grape leaves and “the best Arab barbecue.”

Every one of these kids said they would go back in a heartbeat. Doing what they loved to do best, performing circus stunts, especially with their Jewish and Arab counterparts in Israel, was beyond a dream come true.

That’s when I thought of the song again, “How ya gonna keep ‘em down on the farm/After they’ve seen Paree.”

In Maya’s case, it seems no one will have to. In another hour, she was getting into a car to go to a juggling conference in Indiana.

For video interviews of the St. Louis Arches’ homecoming, go to www.stljewishlight.com/multimedia

To read Jessica Hentoff’s blogs about the trip, go to circusday.org/blog.