

Jessica Hentoff

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Circus Harmony Members Home After Extended Stay In Israel

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Update July 29: The St. Louis Arches arrived safely in the city this morning. The nine performers and three adults had their stay in Israel extended for almost a week after flights in and out of that country were temporarily halted.

The trip was Arches' member Donesha Buhr's first time out of the United States. She says, while she enjoyed the experience, she's excited to be home.

"Once the pilot said 15 more minutes until landing in St. Louis, I think I screamed a little bit. I'm not sure, because I was just so excited to see my parents. Finally hear their voice. It's very heartwarming."

Original article: The fighting in the Mideast has extended the stay in Israel of a local acrobatic group that uses the circus to bring people together.

Nine kids and three adults from [Circus Harmony](#) were scheduled to return to St. Louis July 23, but the decision to halt flights between the U.S. and Israel left them scrambling to make new plans. Now the flying St. Louis Arches will be landing next Tuesday morning.



The St. Louis Arches perform at Circus Flora in 2010.

Credit Provided by Circus Flora

Reached by phone, Circus Harmony founder Jessica Hentoff said her group has been "staying totally in the north of Israel where it is peaceful to the point of idyllic."

Hentoff said that the St. Louis contingent – the Arches is the name of the performing group within Circus Harmony -- has been living in the homes of host families in Jewish and Arab villages. “We have not had a single moment when we felt threatened ... have not heard a single siren or taken shelter at any time.”

The conflict, which is centered to the south along the border with Gaza, was beginning as the group was getting ready to leave. Hentoff said the potential for danger caused a lot of discussion. Parents, the board of directors and Hentoff “decided to make the trip because the Galilee is a safe part of Israel, right now,” she said. “We will be performing at City Museum before you know it.”



Jessica Hentoff
Credit Maïke Schulz

Circus Harmony has been collaborating with [Galilee Foundation for Ethical Education](#), which runs the Galilee Circus, since 2007. Arab and Jewish children work together in the Galilee Circus in much the same way that Hentoff brings together youth from throughout the St. Louis region. The two troupes have exchanged visits several times over the years.

As Hentoff said, “We call ourselves the social circus, which means we use the teaching and performing of circus arts to motivate social change – building bridges between communities.”

Through Galilee Circus, “Jewish and Arab families get together because their kids work together.”

The American kids are aware of the fighting. The homes they stay in have televisions on, just as their own homes would in a time of crisis, Hentoff said. “Our kids can’t understand the TV ... but they can see that the older people are very upset.”

The kids are kids, she said. They get along.

The extended stay has meant that the media have come calling. Hentoff found that interesting but noted that the circus programs that bring people together are working all the time and should receive press coverage all the time.

The extra time in Israel will not go to waste. Hentoff said, “When we got stranded, we got more offers for activities and donations and places to perform than we could do.”

And are the kids homesick? Hentoff laughed, “It’s the grownups who want to get back; the kids are thrilled that they are staying here longer.”