

Have you ever thought about running away with the circus? Tucked away on the third floor of City Museum, the **Circus Harmony** backstage and practice space is frenzied with performers preparing for the next run-through, and the circus executive/artistic director Jessica Hentoff is in the center ring. With more than 40 years of circus experience, she ran away with the circus and eventually found herself in St. Louis starting her own circus school and helping hundreds of students defy gravity and discover their potential through circus arts.



We caught up with Jessica one Saturday morning as she applied make-up to the clowns and hurried off to the ring for a rehearsal. Life for her is definitely a circus, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

## **Was being in the circus a childhood dream? How did you stumble upon the circus?**

I took a circus class in college, and I thought it was cool. It was my first experience with the circus. I went on to graduate with a degree in Sociology, and then, I ran away with the circus. I joined the Methodist Youth Circus and was later a founding member of the Big Apple Circus in New York. I have

been doing this now for 41 years.

## **How did you end up in St. Louis?**

I'm from New York, but I settled in St. Louis in 1985. At the time, I was part of an aerial double trapeze act, and my partner was moving to St. Louis to be closer to her family. Though the act eventually came to an end, I had already invested my time and started the Circus Harmony school. I was here to stay, and I have been here ever since. For the past 18 years, Circus Harmony has been located inside City Museum. We started with parties at the museum, and now we have a full-time school venture.

## **For some people, the first thing that comes to mind when someone says "circus" is taming lions in the center ring. What is circus to you?**

Circus is the most joyful art form featuring the perfect confluence of athleticism and all of the arts – dance, music, theater and performance. Above all, the circus is joyful and inspirational.

## **What makes Circus Harmony different?**

Circus Harmony is one of the most respected pre-professional circus schools in the United States, and we are centered on social concern. Circus Harmony is the teaching and performing of circus arts to motivate social change by building character in individuals and bridge communities through everything from clowning to flying trapeze.

Students of the school perform on a regular basis, literally hundreds of shows a year. It is so important for students to experience performance and the audience.

**Tell me a little bit about being a circus coach.**

We have several circus coaches, peer mentors and student teachers. I am actually the circus director, but I do the majority of the circus coaching off-site and leading the advanced classes. Our student teachers are some of the best, and it is so important for our students to see their teachers perform. We also have award-winning teachers. I was the first recipient of the American Youth Circus Organization/American Circus Educators Excellence in Education award. We have a juggling coach that has received an Excellence in Education award from the International Jugglers Association. Many of our alumni also come back to teach in the summer months.

**What types of classes do you offer?**

The school offers a complete circus arts experience from beginner to professional level from ages 3 to 88! Students learn circus arts – trapeze, juggling, wire-walking, clowning, tumbling...a little bit of everything. We have Level 1 classes for the beginners and Level 2 for the more advanced. Students are not separated by age; they are separated by ability. A person's age, race and neighborhood doesn't matter. It's what you do that counts. It is a joy to watch students of all ages, even the little three year olds. We perform daily at City Museum, and the public is accepting of all of our students at the level that they are.

We have a summer camp starting up in June. The new Circus Performance Camps are offered in two-week sessions that end with a public performance in the second week. Students feel what it is like to be a circus artist from the costumes and make-up to the performance. At the St. Louis location, we will also be adding Flying Trapeze classes Tuesday through Thursday. This summer at Rain Tree School we will be offering a Unicycle and Juggling Club, which is perfect for kids and adults together. For the first time ever, we will also be offering circus arts classes at New Town in St. Charles.

**Do you have to be in shape to take circus classes?**

You take circus classes to get in shape! Physical conditioning is important for any sport, and it is certainly part of circus training. You don't need to be in shape when you start. You get in shape as you learn. Besides the physical conditioning, you are also learning to control your body and emotions.

**How do you know that a student has potential?**

I have a pretty good eye for potential. I can look at a person and physically see if they are able to succeed, but it is ultimately attitude over aptitude. You can have the physical skills, but no one can give you the drive to succeed. You have to walk that path. When you finally decide to go for it and have the aptitude and attitude together, then you are unstoppable. For me, it is exciting to see students go beyond what I could have ever accomplished.

**What do you hope to instill in your students?**

I wear a ring that says, "Everything is possible." I believe that to be true. Our mission statement says it all: "Circus Harmony teaches the art of life through circus education. We work to build character and expand the community for youth of all ages, cultures, abilities and backgrounds. 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." I want children to know you can fly and defy gravity and other limitations.

### **For your advanced students that have completed their training at Circus Harmony, what's next? Do they run away with the circus?**

Students that are serious about circus will end up at Cole National de Cirque, the Circus School of Montreal. Five students have gone on to that school, which is more difficult to get into than Harvard. We have former students professionally performing all over the world. One young man was hired by Cirque de Soliel. Two former students are touring with Seven Fingers – one of the best contemporary circuses in the world today. They have been to France and Russia, and they are headed to Argentina. They are literally travelling the world with the circus on tour. The Youngest Human Cannonball at Ringling Brothers Circus came from Circus Harmony. One of our alumni is a juggler currently ranked number seven in the world. Another student, who began with Circus Harmony at the age of 7, is currently walking the wire with the Flying Wallendas.

### **Why should readers "join the circus"?**

To come fly is a family thing. You can do it as a family, and you can all fly.

Circus Harmony presents performances every weekend at 1 and 3 p.m. and daily during the summer months at [City Museum](#), located at 701 N. 15th St. in St. Louis. Additionally, there are monthly shows April through October at the Flying Trapeze Center under the train shed at [St. Louis Union Station](#), located at 1820 Market St. The Circus Harmony advanced performance youth circus troupe, St. Louis Arches, can also be seen performing this summer with Circus Flora in Grand Center.

Circus classes are available year-round at New Town in St. Charles, Rain Tree School and City Museum. Performance Summer Camps at City Museum begin on June 15.

For more information on classes and performances, call 314-436-7676 or visit [circusharmony.org](http://circusharmony.org).