

CBS St. Louis National Buzz for St. Louis' Only Social Circus School

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(From left) Sidney Iking Bateman, Jessica Hentoff, and Melvin Diggs

ST. LOUIS (KMOX) – A local organization achieves national attention for turning lives around.

“I for sure would have been following in the footsteps of my brothers or my uncles. Unfortunately that’s, I have to say, being in prison, or selling

drugs, or even dead.”

But Sidney Iking Bateman, who grew up in north St. Louis, is alive and well and traveling the world right now – thanks to social circus.

A [Buzzfeed article lists 17 circuses](#) that are changing the world, and [Circus Harmony](#) of St. Louis was ranked No. 2.

No surprise to Bateman, or his performing partner, Melvin Diggs, who also grew up in north city. Both are Circus Harmony graduates.

“He and Iking have been to, they’re in France right now. They’ve been to Russia, Argentina, Istanbul, Spain. The rest of their family has never even been out of St. Louis,” says Circus Harmony’s executive director, Jessica Hentoff, who started the social circus program.

Bateman, who says Circus Harmony “most definitely saved [his] life,” and Diggs, are in France performing with Seven Fingers Circus Company out of Quebec.

“I for sure was not going down the right path. And I had no stability in my life before circus,” Bateman says, “and circus was the glue that held everything together and put everything in to its right place.”

Hentoff says her former students are bringing north St. Louis with them.

The duo’s act is acrobatic hoop-diving, which symbolizes the doors the two had to go through to get out of their life in St. Louis, she says. The soundtrack to their act is an interview with them talking about “growing up African-American in St. Louis and waiting to be the next person shot or arrested.”

Circus Harmony of St. Louis

Hentoff began teaching social circus around 1980. It has since grown into a worldwide movement.

Hentoff says she didn’t set out to change the world, but early on, saw the benefits. An early project brought together Jewish and Muslim children from St. Louis whose temples were a few blocks from each other, but “who would never have crossed paths,” she says. “And, then I saw the power of what circus does.”

The program now includes children of all races, religions and economic backgrounds who learn that it doesn’t matter what you are – what matters is what you can do.

[Circus Harmony](#) is home to the St. Louis Arches – the elite acrobats who perform at Circus Flora and regularly at the City Museum.

