In January, Circus Harmony will host its annual show, titled “Accelerando,” at the City Museum. A nonprofit launched in 2001, Circus Harmony has used circus arts for social change, welcoming more than 1,300 youth from around the city into its programming. For its upcoming show, graduates of the organization are assisting with choreographing the show, including Sidney “Iking” Bateman, who credits the organization with transforming his life.

Born and raised in St. Louis’ Walnut Park, Bateman was first introduced to acrobatics at a young age, watching his brothers and uncles casually do flips and gathering with kids in the neighborhood at a park to flip against each other. “We would then challenge other neighborhoods and kids from around St. Louis,” Bateman says. After attending a show featuring the St. Louis Arches—a pre-professional group that performs each week at the City Museum—Bateman became involved in Circus Harmony.
Under the guidance and mentorship of the organization’s founder, Jessica Hentoff, he followed the path all the way to one of the most esteemed Big Tops: Cirque du Soleil. 

Currently located in Mexico City, 26-year-old Bateman is enjoying the spotlight. He was recently featured on PBS in a documentary short titled “The Acrobat,” and he was mentioned in Fortune as a part of its raceAhead series. As he prepares for his return home to assist with Circus Harmony’s upcoming show, Bateman shared with us his career trajectory, how circus offered an opportunity for him to overcome his circumstance and what’s next.

**How did you get involved with Circus Harmony?**

I got involved with Circus Harmony because I went to see a show that the St. Louis Arches were a part of, called Circus Flora. It was the first-ever circus show I attended, and I didn’t like it at all—but that was the first attempt by my mentor Diane Miller to get me involved in circus. I joined the Arches later that year.
What kept bringing you back to the organization?

I was attracted to Circus Harmony for many reasons, but the most important was that it was a place where I could be free and be myself without any judging. I loved the feeling it gave me to perform. I loved the security and safety it gave that I didn’t have at home or in my neighborhood.

You’ve gone from flipping in your neighborhood with childhood peers to a city-based nonprofit to studying at a top circus school to now performing for the world-renowned Cirque du Soleil. What has that trajectory been like for you? Is there anything that you would have done differently?

I like to think the trajectory of my life has gone this way for a reason, and I couldn’t and wouldn’t change a thing. It really made me the person I am today. I have very strong beliefs, a strong work ethic—and that’s because I had it so hard growing up. I believe if I wasn’t running away from something, then my drive to get out of my situation wouldn’t be as strong, which would have led to me giving up in school or even now. It’s very easy for me to know what I want, because I know what I don’t want.

What has been your biggest challenge thus far?

I don’t have many challenges at the moment. I feel my life is pretty great, and things are right where they need to be. I look at it this way because there are many challenges that my family and friends have in St. Louis, challenges and problems that I would have if I was in my old lifestyle. I’m in a happy place. If I had to pick something just for the sake of this question, I miss my daughter while on the road.

Do you give back to Circus Harmony? How so?

I credit Circus Harmony and specifically Jessica Hentoff for everything I have. This great life, these great life lessons that I’ve learned implement into my life now. They are a big reason why I’m considered so successful in my field. I give my time to Circus Harmony. I come back and work with
the kids. I do what I can so that the youth can follow in my footsteps if they want to. It would be wrong if I didn't do anything at all. Another coach of mine, Warren Bacon, is very important person in my life. He gave me many tools and he would always tell me that his coach gave him. He asked his coach how to repay him and his coach’s words were, “Pass it on.” Warren passed it on to me. So it’s my duty to pass it on.

Finding acrobatics at a young age, and then Circus Harmony, allowed you an alternative route and destiny (you mention in the documentary that you didn’t want to become another statistic). Have you thought what it might have meant if your peers had found an outlet to express themselves? Additionally, have you thought about what it means to offer youth, particularly black youth, a way of taking a skill set that they might not even know they’re practicing and nurturing them so that they can imagine what their future might look like on their own terms?

I’m only one guy that’s been able to break free of a bad situation. There are many talented kids and people with a story that would be hard to believe. Lots of them don’t have the platform to share that story. Luckily, I do. It’s all about creating more opportunities for kids like myself. I found circus and I
found a new light, a new way. Basketball, football, [being a] rapper were my only options, but finding circus opened up my mind to so much more.

**What’s next for you?**

I have many plans for myself and my daughter. At the moment, I’m working with Cirque du Soleil, and I’m using this opportunity to find more ways to learn about other things and planning for the future. I’m getting into real-estate investing. I’m writing a book about my life. Eventually, I’d like there to be a short film about my life. I have endless possibilities on what I can do. I got the confidence to do that from circus. From a kid that aspired to only be a basketball player or football player, it’s pretty amazing how things change because of one decision I made. Now I can really say I can be anything I want to be and mean it.

**Is there anything that you’re hoping to do with your success? Any initiatives, organizations or mentorship that you’ve considered?**

I would like to eventually use my knowledge in real estate investing to take Circus Harmony further—new space, bigger program. I also want to eventually go into public schools and speak to kids, let them know that the world is so much bigger. Let them know it’s a big world, and they have to go see it before settling.

*For more information or to purchase $20 tickets to Circus Harmony’s upcoming show, “Accelerando,” a circus spy thriller with performances Jan. 19, 20, 26 and 27, visit Circus Harmony’s website.*