DOWNTOWN— With the right angle of a toss and perfect arch, 12-year-old Michael Baum executed a beautiful backflip through a hula-hoop.

Circus Harmony owner and founder Jessica Hentoff stopped what she was doing to congratulate him.

Hentoff is one of the student’s Number One cheerleaders.

Located on the cusp of the Delmar divide, City Museum has been an arts staple in St. Louis for over 10 years. The tumbling and juggling acts of Circus Harmony make a colorful and creative addition to the museum’s offerings.

The Circus Harmony tent is located on the third floor of the museum in an arena-style setting with seating for 200 guests. It is a performance draw, but also a place where kids of all ages and social and economic backgrounds can learn while building friendships.

“I learned new techniques in tumbling,” said Michael, adding that he, “thought it would be cool. I didn’t have anything else to do. It helped me work with other kids and helped me communicate better.”
Hentoff described Circus Harmony as a social circus. Her program uses circus arts to motivate social change by building character in individuals as well as bridges in communities. Over the years, Circus Harmony has developed into a pre-professional program. Many of her students have started getting into prestigious circus colleges and working with circus companies like Cirque du Soleil.

One of her students, Sidney “Iking” Bateman, came from the Walnut Park community and grew up having an unstable childhood. Now he tours all over the world doing circus acts. He has an eight-minute mini documentary about him, which will air on the Nine Network PBS American Experience website starting Oct. 7.

Before venturing off on her own, Hentoff was a part of St. Louis Arches, which started at Jefferson Elementary School in Murphy Park. St. Louis Arches is the premier youth performance troupe from Circus Harmony. The troupe is currently comprised of young people ages 13-22 from throughout the St. Louis area.

“I really started it just to teach circus arts,” said Hentoff, “but then all these ancillary things started to happen. They’re getting more focused, working together as a team, controlling their frustration, controlling their anger. They’re getting to go places outside their neighborhood they have never been. They have experiences and opportunities that they just didn’t have before.”

Initially, St. Louis Arches was funded through Circus Flora, a local circus company. When funding ended in 2001, Hentoff decided to start Circus Harmony.

The first program Hentoff did with Circus Harmony was Circus Shalom Shalom. She gathered Jewish kids and Islamic kids and taught them circus acts. The mosque and the temple were within a few miles of each other, one located on Waterman and the other on North Grand, but according to Hentoff, the kids had never spent much time around each other. The kids performed the shows in the mosque and temples. Around this time, Hentoff realized she had to start a full-time circus school.

Hentoff points out that her students are developing conflict resolutions skills, building teamwork and communication skills.

“When people come in here they see these kids perform doing amazing things and maybe if they see them on the street they might cross the street. And it changes their perception about these young people,” said Hentoff. She added that parents have thanked her for introducing their children to kids from other neighborhoods and other backgrounds.
Jahlah Baum, Michael’s sister, has been training with Circus Harmony for a year and said she was looking for something different. Circus Harmony held a camp at her school and she said it had everything she was looking for, so she joined.

“I learned how to not give up and it makes me feel amazing,” said Jahlah. “It’s really exciting. I like Circus Harmony because it feels like a family.”

17-year-old Kyran Walton of the Midtown/Jeff-Vander-Lou area said being a part of Circus Harmony is how he learned to overcome challenges through circus arts. He said that he played all types of sports as a young kid and would always quit them, but he has been with Circus Harmony since he was eight and doesn’t plan on stopping. He said he feels he can express himself without being judged.

Hentoff said: “In the circus, it’s exciting, you’re a part of a community, people have your back. You also get paid, and this can be a career.”

For more information about Circus Harmony, visit www.circusharmony.org or call 314-436-7676.

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