

# Clowning Around

A Performer at Heart, New Yorker-in-Exile Jessica Hentoff Ran Away With the Circus

By Claire Hamilton

Growing up on the Upper West Side, Jessica Hentoff, daughter of prominent culture writer Nat Hentoff, was “hard-pressed to find a tree to climb,” she says. Her father recalls her adventurous self “always with a book in hand.” While he penned prose for the *New Yorker* in the 1980s, she was exploring circus studies at the State University of New York, Purchase. Not resigned to learning just a few tricks, the inquisitive graduate actually ran away with the big top.

“I thought, ‘I can do this, I can fly through the air, I can juggle,’” says Jessica Hentoff, a co-founder of New York’s Big Apple Circus, who traveled as an aerialist and cyclist with various troupes after college. And she wasn’t just clowning around. Even her marriage began inside a circus ring. “As father of the bride, I had to take her down when she came riding in on a horse. That’s Jessica,” Nat Hentoff says.

Today, 49-year-old Jessica Hentoff runs the Circus Day Foundation, a nonprofit circus school, from a corner of the St. Louis City Museum. Under her guidance, artful tumbling tricks and tightrope-walking are no mere spectacle; they demand collaboration and technique that, she believes, allow troupe members’ self-consciousness to slip away with their street clothes. “[It’s a] social circus program. We’re teaching life skills like focus, persistence, readiness and teamwork,” she says.

Hentoff teaches hundreds of students, mostly 7- to 14-year-olds, from the best and worst neighborhoods around St. Louis, who pay according to their means. “What I found in youth and professional circus was such a wonderful sense of family and community. We very purposefully bring [diverse groups of] kids together,” she says.

Her 2002 Salaam Shalom circus teamed up Muslim and Jewish performers, and last year’s “Far East Meets Midwest” event introduced kids to Chinese hoop diving. Hentoff’s greatest success was Circus Harmony, a 2004 show featuring her advanced St. Louis Arches troupe performing alongside a bluegrass-klezmer band, Persian jazz guitarist and Japanese taiko drummers. Chinese zheng music accompanied tricks by a 14-year-old acrobat hanging by his heels.

The circus, Hentoff says, is a source of positive stability especially to underprivileged and disabled performers, like the girl with spinal bifida who climbs ropes. It’s unlike competitive sports, she says, because it requires neither a

particular aptitude nor a losing team. One can juggle, tumble, clown or walk on a wire and “strangers say, ‘you’re wonderful.’”

One 13-year-old student comes three to four times per week to juggle, tumble and unicycle, despite having



Junior Aerialists: Flying with ease

recently witnessed the murder of his uncle at home. And a slight 11-year-old just returned after a brief stint dealing drugs. “It’s everything that a gang is, but [this] gang activity is a good activity,” she says.

Despite some students’ troubles, Hentoff doesn’t paint a rich-kid, poor-kid dichotomy. “I think all kids are at risk because kids are raising themselves,” she says. She cites video games as a menace to childhood development.

Part of Hentoff’s personal balancing act is her own three children — an 8-year-old knife juggler, a 10-year-old balancer and a 12-year-old aerialist. She also works to secure grants and book special performances, like the school’s NCAA Final Four performance on April 4 and a recent, corporate event for Boeing. She is currently searching for corporate sponsors and wants to raise enough for a larger rehearsal space.

Though Nat Hentoff used to protest the aerial stunts that once put his daughter in the hospital, he always admired her determination and ingenuity. “Not many of us know what we’re here for until it’s too late,” he says.

With the conviction of a woman who has known her own purpose for years, Jessica Hentoff says: “What people always remark on is how well these kids all get along. Well, of course, why shouldn’t they?” ■

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