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# Developing Community Circus in Aotearoa New Zealand: Ideas and Observations from Circus Leaders

Prepared by Rachael Trotman

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Fund

# Preface

This report is part of a wider research project from 2011-2013 that aims to support the development of community circus in Aotearoa New Zealand. It was funded by the Lotteries Community Sector Research Fund and involves a partnership between Circus Kumarani ([www.circuskumarani.co.nz](http://www.circuskumarani.co.nz)), a community circus provider based in Dargaville, and Auckland based researcher Rachael Trotman, with assistance from Alex Woodley and several associates from Point Research ([www.pointresearch.co.nz](http://www.pointresearch.co.nz)).

As a partnership, this research is guided by a project team involving Jenny Huriwai (Circus Kumarani's Project Manager), Frances Kelliher and Thomas Hinz (founders of Circus Kumarani and now aligned with Auckland Community Circus, [www.communitycircus.co.nz](http://www.communitycircus.co.nz)), Rachael Trotman and Alex Woodley.

The project's research methods involve a national online survey of the community circus sector (2011); a literature review on community circus (2012); evaluation of four community circus programmes (2012); and interview feedback from key players in New Zealand and overseas, including workshop feedback from the Auckland Community Circus Convention in February 2012. The overall research findings are presented in a written summary of findings and also via a DVD that will be available later in 2013.

Each research component is written up separately and is accessible at [www.circuskumarani.co.nz](http://www.circuskumarani.co.nz) and [www.communitycircus.co.nz](http://www.communitycircus.co.nz).

A key aim of this research is to shine a light on the thinking and practice surrounding community circus within New Zealand, and to place this within an international context. This report presents ideas and observations from national and international circus leaders, to identify key factors that will support community circus to flourish in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The project team would like to sincerely thank all those who participated in this report – your work is inspiring.

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## Key findings

Community circus involves the use of circus skills such as trapeze, balancing, acrobatics and juggling, as a vehicle for personal and social development. Community circus is one strand of a small yet diverse circus sector in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Within this wider national circus industry, this research has identified that there are a small number of community circus groups operating locally across New Zealand, each of which is unique and aiming to make a difference for participants and local communities. As with the wider circus industry however, the community circus sector is perceived to be fragmented in New Zealand, with individuals and circus groups generally operating in isolation from each other, with some exceptions<sup>1</sup>.

As independent local operators, community circus groups typically struggle to obtain funding and resources, achieve self-sufficiency, evaluate their activity, promote their activity and raise public awareness of community circus.

While local community circus groups reflect the culture and identity of their community, their success depends on key factors including passionate and committed leaders, having clear goals and quality circus teachers with broad appeal, securing funding, an ability to collaborate and to engage volunteers and community interest.

The key finding from this research report is the need for specific nationally coordinated activities, for community circus in Aotearoa New Zealand to become more than a small number of localised community circus groups.

These nationally coordinated activities would seek to strengthen existing community circus groups, assist the establishment of new groups, support connecting and collective strategising by the community circus sector and raise public awareness of circus.

Through this activity, common goals and relationships among community circus practitioners nationally can be fostered, while respecting and celebrating the diverse character of community circus groups at grassroots level.

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<sup>1</sup> For example the recent efforts of the Wellington Circus Trust to hold a National Circus Convention in April 2013 (this has been postponed until funding has been secured); Circus Kumarani instigating national community circus conferences; the Northland Stars circus programme for high achievers in circus skills across Northland; and Auckland Community Circus partnering with Toi Ora Live Arts Trust and Hohepa Auckland to create a social arts hub in Victoria Park, Auckland.

This could be achieved by establishing a national network, which would require a person or group to run this network and provide key services, such as:

- proactively supporting local community circus groups around issues such as governance, funding, promotion, planning and evaluation
- acting as a national circus information centre
- fostering circus training and mentoring opportunities
- running networking events
- developing and maintaining a central community circus website

A successful national community circus network would:

- have strategic, adaptive leadership, supported by solid project management and administrative skills
- be project based to optimise use of funding
- support the development of relationships among community circus providers with funders, councils, schools and other community groups, as well as the international circus community
- work to raise the profile of circus nationally
- foster circus training and development from amateur to elite levels, to produce new generations of instructors and mentors

Goals for a national circus network for Aotearoa New Zealand may include:

- at least one national circus training school and diverse accredited training opportunities
- fostering sustainable funding models for community circus enterprises
- developing circus centres or hubs in cities and regions where favourable conditions for success exist
- annual highlights and networking opportunities – shows, local, regional and national events
- national standards for accreditation of instructors
- national standards/guidelines for health and safety
- collaborative projects and sharing nationally and internationally, both within the circus sector and with other social art forms, such as dance, theatre, music, Maori and Pacific arts

Bringing the community circus sector together to discuss the above, potentially in tandem with the wider circus sector in New Zealand, is an ideal next step.

# Introduction

*"Circus is a wonderful colourful world - there are lots of people who can meet on that stage" (Frances Kelliher).*

This report presents insights of some leaders in community circus, from New Zealand and overseas. These leaders describe their own experience of community circus, plus their suggestions for assisting the development of community circus in New Zealand.

The report's purpose is to inform a wider research project funded by the Lotteries Community Sector Research Fund, which aims to support community circus to flourish in New Zealand.

The report is presented as follows.

- Method used to develop the report
- Ideas from national circus leaders
- National community circus stories
- International community circus stories and insights for New Zealand



## Method

During 2012, face-to-face and phone interviews were held with eleven national community circus leaders, and with six international community circus leaders. In February 2012, a workshop was held with around thirty participants at the Auckland Circus Convention, most of whom were from New Zealand, though several came from overseas. The core question asked of all these people was, based on their experience and knowledge:

*"What would support the development of community circus in Aotearoa New Zealand?"*

National and international participants were also asked to tell the story in brief of the community circus group they had connections with. They were asked about the challenges they faced, their successes and the insights and opportunities they envisaged for community circus provision as a result.



# National community circus leaders

## Auckland Circus Convention Workshop

*"We're all in different boats, but we need to raise the level of the lake"*  
(Matt Hall, Former International Juggling Association Champion, United States).

*"The best way to grow it is to give it a go"* (Tom, Riverside Circus, South Auckland).

In February 2012, 30 people from the circus field attended a workshop at the Auckland Circus Convention at Corban Estate in Henderson. The research project was presented to the participants, including Matt Hall (United States) and several participants from Australia. The question posed to the workshop participants was:

*What does community circus need to blossom in New Zealand?*

Responses are grouped under the following themes.

Theme	Comment
<b>Increase the profile of community circus</b>	<p>Greater public awareness is needed on what community circus is, where it's happening and how to take part</p> <p>Educate funders regarding community circus – what it is and its benefits</p>
<b>'Package' and communicate community circus differently for various audiences</b>	<p>Instead of community circus call it street arts, social arts or a name that resonates with different groups</p> <p>Tell the stories of community circus in New Zealand</p> <p><i>"There are lots of different gateways into circus – corporate, grass roots – focus on the area you are passionate about and market that"</i></p>
<b>Opportunities in New Zealand</b> <i>"Move to network nationally but everyone continue to do their own thing"</i>	<p>Have a national umbrella, generic policies, information, best practices and support to set up locally</p> <p>Try community circus in different communities</p>



Educate, build the resource base, including skilled and certified teachers and training opportunities

Cultivate funding for international exchanges

Collaborate with overseas organisations

Develop a regional competition programme, run circus related competitions to grow awareness, create skill sharing opportunities

Share resources, for example recycle second hand props

Start social media and web based groups

Professionalise the sector

## What is possible in New Zealand?

*"Circus should be up there as an arts practice, like the visual arts, dance and so on. It has a 2000 year old global history, New Zealand is very backward on this, but I have seen a big difference in the last seven years. Circus is multicultural, global, accessible, you don't need language or to read or write" (Deborah Pope).*

Eleven community circus leaders and practitioners were interviewed during 2012, to gather stories of community circus in New Zealand and to identify what supports community circus to succeed and opportunities to develop community circus nationally. Their responses echo and build on the ideas raised at the Auckland convention and are summarised below.

## What supports community circus to succeed

For community circus providers, the key requirements for success in designing and delivering community circus include the following.

### Have a clear vision

*"Stick with your vision and get support for that – do excellent work there and the support will come rather than chase dollars and projects" (Frances Kelliher).*

As with most initiatives, having a clear intention regarding what you want to achieve is vital to success. The vision and any associated plan needs to be simple, attractive to others in order to enlist support, able to be clearly communicated and positively framed.

## Quality teaching and programmes

The people attracted to a community circus class or programme depends largely on those teaching it and their skills and expertise. Younger teachers will tend to appeal more to children and young people; those with an affinity with disabled people to all ages and abilities; women teachers may attract more women and so on. Teachers also need to be motivated, passionate, open to broadening and upping their skill level and able to work well with a wide range of people – in short, good teachers.

## Accessible and well supported

To succeed, community circus needs to attract participants and be able to foster support from its community, including volunteer support, participation from parents and families and be able to attract audiences for public performances. Building positive relationships in order to attract funding, resources and community support and participation is integral to any successful community circus endeavour. This can include forming a partnership with the local council, with funders, local businesses, community groups and residents.

To attract people, providers need to make their programmes open and accessible and appealing to all. This not only supports participation but the coming together of diverse people in local communities, which can lead to friendships, neighbourhood support and joint projects. Free and ticketed public performances help with this local engagement, as does performing in a variety of locations, from kindergartens to rest homes.

Building and maintaining good community interaction and support is considered key to success. Fundraising through shows is also one way to build revenue, profile and community engagement.

## Profile and promotion

Having a good variety of documentation and quality promotional material is seen as a key to success. Circus Kumarani and Auckland Community Circus for example have put a lot of energy into filming and taking photos of their activity, plus using social media such as Facebook to communicate and promote their activity.

Getting regional, national and even international recognition can make a huge difference, as Circus Kumarani found when they managed to work with Cirque du Soleil.

## Getting the structure, governance and operations right

*"In New Zealand there is not much support for people trying to get off the ground, you need to be multiskilled, manage volunteers, get funding, do*

*circus, work with different groups; you need to be an all-rounder - funders and other people sit back and wait to see if it will last”.*

Knowing which structure to wrap around a community circus enterprise, plus bringing in the right range of skills, from teaching to governance and administration, can be challenging. Small operations can often work best by partnering with another group to be their fund holder and provide guidance and support when needed, while larger endeavours tend to form a Charitable Trust. All models have their pros and cons.

Getting the right people involved in governance, as well as staff, volunteers and supporters is an issue for any group. Community circus tends to need leaders with charisma and vision, plus the day to day management and administrative skills. Other advice from some of these leaders was to be project based as an organisation, keep costs lean and find a staff/volunteer balance: “As soon as you employ others you start chasing the funding to keep them – keep it project based, though it can be hard to retain good staff on an hour by hour contract”.

## Community circus development opportunities in New Zealand

*“If more resources, spaces and programmes were made available community circus would expand and grow in its own way in each community; I would love to see that happen” (Daniel Hales).*

Drawing from the ideas of national and international circus leaders interviewed for this report, key development opportunities for community circus in New Zealand are as follows.

Theme	Comment
Visibility and promotion  <b><i>“There is a perception that there is no good circus in New Zealand, that you have to buy it in, but we have skills here” (Deborah Pope).</i></b>	People with credibility and a high profile to promote community circus  Reframe perceptions of circus, find the right branding to make it ‘cool’  Relationship development with funders, including funders gaining direct experience of the benefits of community circus, by participating or attending performances  Set up some permanent circus tents
Training, mentoring and professional development, including safe practice	Building competency in safe practice, especially for aerials and more physically demanding activities  Develop guidelines and accreditation around safety

<p><b><i>"The future of the circus industry depends on a training school, we need a place here to train people" (Deborah Pope).</i></b></p> <p><b><i>"The shape and form of national training needs thinking and collective development" (Chris Carrow).</i></b></p>	<p>Mentoring for new and existing groups</p> <p>Professional training school/s and opportunities, pathways from basic training to advanced and master classes, a school for circus trainers and performers</p> <p>Support to access elite circus training for children and young people, to develop career pathways via circus</p> <p>A national training calendar</p> <p>Development potential through hosting travelling circus visitors, internships, circus volunteering through the South Pacific, international exchange opportunities</p>
<p>National coordination, networking and support</p> <p><b><i>"How the circus sector connects, supports each other and develops ideally would be discussed and developed by the sector"</i></b></p> <p><b><i>"Community circus is labour intensive, equipment heavy, it's hard to have all the skills you need; you need a network"</i></b></p>	<p>Have a national coordinator to assess what is needed in different areas and work with the local people to get those needs met, eg funding proposals, communications</p> <p>Develop a national vehicle for circus, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ A national circus centre (eg Finnish Circus Information Centre), which is independent but promotes and supports</li> <li>■ A new body or an existing body (the German model is a national working group of circus providers)</li> <li>■ A national association with a membership</li> </ul> <p>Advertise the national scene, have a central website/point for information, promoting who is doing what where, where to find equipment, resources, network, keep up to date, blog</p> <p>Coordinate regular networking opportunities to share, learn and support</p> <p>A national body could hold funds so that local areas don't need to form legal structures</p> <p>Provide a service responding to local community circus provider needs (mentoring, skills development, strategic planning, finding funding,</p>

	<p>governance etc)</p> <p>Support evaluation, capture the value and stories of circus, use visual methods and social media, simple tools and processes</p> <p>National communication mechanisms</p> <p>Develop a pool of skilled people, including volunteers who can be brought in for different things</p>
Stronger connections within the circus field and with key sectors	<p>Get the circus community helping each other, connecting</p> <p>Bring organisers of key festivals together to jointly plan and collaborate</p> <p>National push to get circus happening in schools – three identified routes into schools are via the arts, fitness/PE and as a social intervention (for example to combat bullying and truancy), also by linking programmes with the curriculum</p> <p>Make international links, especially with Australia and in the Pacific, have regular conventions</p> <p>Circus needs good advocates to connect with key groups such as social workers, Principals/schools, youth workers, Maori and Pacific leaders and art forms (though the latter can't be imposed, it has to come from the grass roots)</p> <p>Seek out research partnerships</p>

# National community circus stories

## ‘Circool’ – Community Circus in Waipu

Achmed Abman

*"The most important thing is the buzz and the great energy – the creativity of circus".*

Achmed runs community circus activity and programmes in Waipu and other parts of Northland. He was exposed to circus skills by an English couple when travelling around New Zealand with his family on their bus in the 1990s: *"I was hooked in an hour!"*

Achmed initially put on several circus shows at Café Eutopia in Kaiwaka (‘Circus Kaiwakanui’), then branched out and taught juggling and circus arts in Mangawhai and Kaiwaka between 2000 and 2004. In 2004 Achmed met Thomas Hinz from Circus Kumarani and he asked Thomas to take part in a circus show he was doing called ‘80 Minutes Around the World’. Achmed liked the Circus Kumarani approach of offering circus workshops to children and people with disabilities and started to take part in the creative centre emerging in Dargaville through Circus Kumarani.



Achmed became employed part time with Circus Kumarani and then circus became his full time focus, though much of it remains unpaid. Achmed is the only circus practitioner/teacher in Waipu and a key issue has been what structure to put his around his work. He finds it hard to survive doing circus as a sole trader without other funding support and he has had a Committee operating as an Unincorporated Society supporting his work, but there is a grey area between the ‘business’ side of community circus (allowing Achmed to cover his costs and make a living), versus the ‘community’ side (affordability and access).

In essence, Ahmed offers circus workshops for all comers in Waipu and beyond and gets approached to teach and perform circus in different contexts, but making a decent living out of this is a challenge: “People don’t want to pay much”. Achmed would like to see a strong structure develop around his work, with supportive and skilled members to operate it. For Achmed, an individual can only carry

a community circus venture for so long – you need a group to sustain it:

*"It's like the person on stage, you only want five minutes of them on their own, then you want someone else".*

The circus activity in Waipu is mainly circus workshops with a 'gig' every now and then, concluding every year with the annual Waipu Christmas parade:

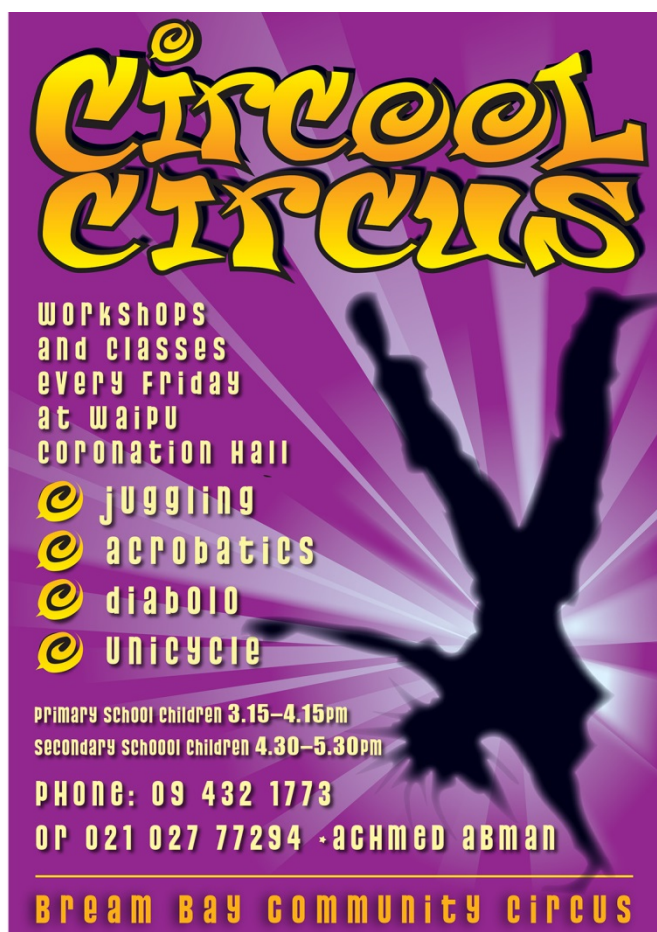
*"For the last five years we have been the runner-up [at the xmas parade]"*.

Achmed sometimes takes children and young people to the Whangarei market to busk and his students take part in other circus activity around the region, such as the Northland Stars programme<sup>2</sup>.

For Achmed, circus is great at 'turning the lights on for people' and he enjoys watching them being nourished through learning and performing:

*"What gives me a buzz is an ADHD boy who achieves something on the high wire".*

The 'buzz' moments happen all the time for people new to circus but a challenge is keeping those moments going - stretching people to new and greater heights and keeping them engaged.



**Circool  
Circus**

WORKSHOPS  
and CLASSES  
EVERY FRIDAY  
at WAIPU  
CORONATION HALL

- Ⓢ juggling
- Ⓢ acrobatics
- Ⓢ diabolo
- Ⓢ unicycle

Primary school children 3.15–4.15pm  
Secondary school children 4.30–5.30pm

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**Bream Bay Community Circus**

Achmed would like to see greater promotion of community circus, a stronger regional and national network, more financial support, being able to charge appropriately and working with motivated people who contribute to what is offered: *"I would like to move from a one man show to a band"*. He feels that groups of people need to drive community circus, with diverse energy and input, to avoid isolated people working on their own in this field and burning out.

For Achmed, in rural New Zealand people 'come out of the woodwork' to learn circus; they are curious and sometimes get hooked. While many people don't want to perform most want to learn the skills. Achmed would like to see a stronger national foundation for community circus, with a regular national gathering, workshops, sharing tricks and having fun, a national newsletter and a

<sup>2</sup> See Trotman, R (2012), Northland Stars: A Summary Overview, for a description of this programme, [www.circuskumarani.co.nz](http://www.circuskumarani.co.nz).

network. This could be modelled on the WOOFing network in New Zealand (Working on Organic Farms), which has an active website with contacts, activity, networks and opportunities for work.

## A Dynamic Circus Partnership, Auckland

### Frances Kelliher and Thomas Hinz

Frances Kelliher and Thomas Hinz are a couple who really live the circus. They set up the Kumarani Productions Trust (Circus Kumarani) in 2003 and instigated this community circus research project. In 2010 they moved from Baylys Beach/Dargaville to Auckland and began running Auckland based community circus programmes through their partnership Hot Spot Productions. In 2012 they formed the Circability Trust - see [www.communitycircus.co.nz](http://www.communitycircus.co.nz) for more on their most recent activity.



During 2013 they are based in Rostock, Germany, where Thomas will run Circus Fantasia, which began in 1995. Circus Fantasia has a 26 metre tent surrounded by circus wagons on the River Warnow, which is a five minute walk from the central city. Frances hopes to visit some successful community circus models while she is in Europe. They plan to return to New Zealand in early 2014.

The Circability Trust has successfully applied for a community lease of the Campbell Free Kindergarten (CFK) in Victoria Park in central Auckland, which will be established during 2013. They have teamed up with the Toi Ora Live Arts Trust<sup>3</sup> and Hohepa Auckland<sup>4</sup> to use the former kindergarten as a social arts centre. Hohepa Auckland will manage the centre and run a training programme for residents with disabilities through an in-house catering service, fitness, arts and circus programmes. Social enterprise options will be explored for sustainability; for example the centre has potential as a birthday party venue.

Toi Ora will develop youth services and artists will be offered the site for rehearsals. Other community groups such as the Deaf Arts Network and Giant

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.toiora.org.nz/>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.hohepa.com/auckland.php>.



Leap Foundation will also be offered the venue. The aim is for the CFK centre to become a social arts hub with exhibitions, arts, fitness and circus workshops and events in the park. Participants will be invited to rename the CFK centre once it has developed its own personality.

Thomas describes his and Frances' community circus approach as having a three part structure:

- Access for all ages and abilities – with a particular focus on inclusion of people with disabilities
- Community interaction and participation – by involving social workers, combining circus with other art forms and creating public performances and events
- Support for 'high achievers' in circus to keep developing their skills

For Thomas:

*"The key thing about community circus is the community. Circus comes second. Up north [in Dargaville with Circus Kumarani] there were amazing highlights, winning national awards<sup>5</sup> and the Cirque du Soleil performances and support but the real success was in the relationships forged, in finally getting downtown Dargaville on board, or collaborating with local iwi at our conferences or fire shows. Someone telling me 'My whole world is Maori, but the circus has opened my eyes to another world out there'".*

Thomas and Frances have always worked with different target groups and then brought those groups together for public performances and interaction. *"We have a focus on disability, but it is the interaction between people with disabilities and children or community members that really has impact".*

Thomas describes the Auckland circus scene as spread out and fragmented, with quite a few individuals doing circus for a living. Teaching, circus classes and performing is going on here and there, unconnected, just individuals and small groups doing their thing, a 'free market' type of model. For him there is potential in bringing some of these people together, to see what is possible, share knowledge and ideas, promote and support each other.

Thomas and Frances believe there is a strong case for the social enterprise model for community circus activity, but it is still uncharted territory and needs time to develop. *"We spent two years with Enterprise Northland developing all the budgets and plans for a circus enterprise but the Community Enterprise Fund was*

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<sup>5</sup> Circus Kumarani has won three national awards: Creative Spaces Award from Arts Access Aotearoa, a Disability Innovation Award from Enhanced Quality Standards (Health) and a Community Learning Award from Adult Community Learning. Cirque du Soleil supported Kumarani (2009 Benefit Partnership Programme) and Circus Kumarani performed for Cirque Du Soleil's cast and crew in 2005 and 2007.

*closed down just as everything was ready for approval. That was a lot of unpaid time and energy". They see a lot of opportunities for social enterprise in Auckland but far fewer in regions that could benefit the most from community circus.*

*"Community circus could be recognised as sport, art, education, social tool, community development, employment or team building option.... it's a big curriculum and funders want specific evidence. And new projects every time. When something works so well why make us constantly reinvent it?"*

Both believe collaboration and working together with strong partners is key.

*"Every region or group needs to build on their own strengths and create their own identity but there is scope to collaborate on common key needs in the industry like health and safety, professional development, research and regulation".*

Frances notes that Auckland is a big town, with needs in south Auckland very different from those in the north, central and west. The greatest perceived need in Auckland is to bring people in the circus sector together and build support mechanisms and opportunities.

## Circus Kumarani, Dargaville

Jenny Huriwai (Project Manager), Adrian Humm (Staff member/circus teacher), Jeanette Wade (Former Board member), Mat Merle and Jo De Carvalho (Staff members/circus teachers)

*"The key is keeping your profile high and doing excellent work".*

Circus Kumarani,<sup>6</sup> officially known as the Kumarani Productions Trust, was established in Dargaville, Northland in 2003 and is a community based organisation promoting circus. A major circus show is planned in 2013 to mark the tenth anniversary of Circus Kumarani. Circus Kumarani is run by Jenny



<sup>6</sup> See [www.circuskumarani.co.nz](http://www.circuskumarani.co.nz).

Huriwai and a small team of paid staff, supported by a larger group of volunteers, and is governed by a Trust Board involving members of the local community.

Circus Kumarani emerged from Frances Kelliher and Thomas Hinz connecting with disability groups in the area and asking if they wanted to take part in a circus show or theatre – the groups chose the circus show and what began as small 'all ages, all abilities' circus classes turned into four sell out local performances. These performances had some influential attendees who asked what was needed for this work to continue and the funding base and Circus Kumarani developed from that point.

The early years of Circus Kumarani were built on strong partnerships with local disability service providers' Kaurilands Skills Centre and Greenways Trust and a powerful mixing of non-disabled and disabled people in terms of classes and shows. Thomas' background with all ages and abilities circus provision in Germany was a key driver behind the early development of Circus Kumarani.

Circus Kumarani grew very rapidly from 2003, securing the current premises in 2004, holding two national circus conventions in Dargaville and then two in Auckland, being the subject of TV documentaries, and receiving Ministry of Social Development funding for Thomas to do teacher training and mentoring for circus providers in Northland and Auckland. Strong support came from Lotteries and the ASB Community Trust. The connection with Cirque du Soleil was reportedly significant in raising the credibility and profile of Circus Kumarani.

Circus Kumarani now offers after school circus skills classes, school holiday programmes, early childhood programmes, school and youth focused programmes, public performances, a monthly 'open stage', the Northland Circus Festival (last held in January 2013), the Northland Stars programme for people with high level circus skills across Northland, an annual Matariki Fire Show and private performances. It also provides entertainment and takes part in local community events from the local Christmas Parade to arts festivals. Circus Kumarani is also a primary member of the Kaipara Whanau Ora Collective – Nga Ripo and recently received Ministry of Social Development funding to provide an anti-bullying programme.

Strengths of Circus Kumarani were noted as follows.

*"We like to show people that circus is working on yourself - to show people their possibility".*

- A feeling of family and the creation of a circus community of passionate people who are all believers in community circus
- Good quality teaching and a non-judgemental, open, friendly, accessible approach; Circus Kumarani premises provide a welcoming space for everyone in the community

- Good volunteer support, with current teachers Mat and Jo from France attracting overseas travellers who tend to stay for a while and bring diversity and life to Dargaville
- The way Circus Kumarani supported the acceptance of disabled people by children and the wider community: "That is the best thing; that makes you cry, it is very powerful mixing kids and disabled people"
- The way Circus Kumarani has visually documented its journey through photos, DVDs and social media

Challenges were considered to include the following.

- An ongoing struggle for secure funding, especially within a depressed local and national financial climate
- Stress and burnout is often an issue for the small team running Circus Kumarani
- Retaining and attracting quality teachers and building diversity in the staff and volunteers
- Getting circus into schools is challenging, given the tight funding environment in schools
- Constantly raising the teaching level and what is offered, to retain interest and take people to their next level
- Attracting people to participate in circus activities is an issue, compounded by geographic issues in Dargaville such as lack of public transport and the fact that it covers a wide rural area, with low population density
- Building credibility and connecting with people who can contribute time and resources

The future for Circus Kumarani centres on achieving funding security, gaining traction in schools, refreshing their image and approach, finding a purpose built or more suitable premises to develop a social arts/creative community hub (the current premises are too small), continuing to attract trainers, volunteers and participants and make a difference in the community through circus and other social art forms.

## Wellington Circus Trust

Deborah Pope, Director

*"I would love to see circus being part of everyone's life".*



The Wellington Circus Trust<sup>7</sup> (the Trust) has been running since 2006 and aims to help build a thriving circus community in Wellington. It provides a wide range of circus classes for children, teenagers and adults via its circus hub at 11 Hutchinson Street, Newtown.

During 26 to 28 April 2013 the Trust hosted and organised the Wellington Festival of Circus. It also intends to host New Zealand's first industry wide National Circus Conference, when funding is secured.

The Trust employs two part time staff and between five to seven part time trainers. As well as providing a range of circus classes, including keep fit classes and beginners to master classes in circus skills from trapeze to pole to hula hoop, the Trust is developing its capacity to provide training for circus teachers. It is exploring setting up a one year Certificate class, delivered in partnership with a compatible tertiary education provider. In January/February 2013 it ran a ten day circus skills summer school for Whitereia Polytechnic students.

The philosophy at the Trust is that people should be paid proper wages – that circus is an industry and a career path as well as an art form. Thus the model is user pays with a social or community circus arm that is small (currently five hours per week), but there is interest in expanding this aspect of the Trust's work. The community circus elements of the Trust involve providing circus classes for special needs children, schools and youth at risk (with the involvement of a social worker), plus some youth holiday programmes. The Circus Trust subsidises this activity, plus they seek external funding for it.

At the Wellington Circus Trust circus with children is the biggest growth area – *"Kids are a natural target for circus"*. Leisure and keep fit classes are also quite popular, with a range of people attending them. Most of the people attending the Trust's classes at present are between the ages of 23 and 45, with disposable income – *"the classes aren't cheap"*.

Being a charitable trust enables the organisation to pursue external funding. Deborah has noticed more money circulating for circus than three years ago and the Trust is increasingly making connections with other organisations who can help.

Deborah reports that the Wellington Circus Trust is in good health, with good governance, a thriving circus community, growing classes, staff getting paid and time within Deborah's paid hours for development work. Most importantly, the Trust has a secure home base, with a three year lease on the current rented premises. Having this home base is viewed as critical for the Trust and its aims.

Other current strengths of the Trust include having access to good circus teachers, experienced staff and Wellington City Council support. The Trust has

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.facebook.com/wellingtoncircus> and <http://www.circus.org.nz>.

international connections and is starting to make more global links, in part by bringing experts in and connecting local people to international training opportunities.

For Deborah, the circus arts in New Zealand are driven by people with passion and experience, and often by people from overseas, or with overseas experience. Deborah mirrors this, having left New Zealand aged 21 to travel the world. She got involved in New Circus in England and has strong connections with Australian circus through involvement in the Fruit Fly Circus and having been a Director of Circus Oz:

*"Circus attracts certain types of people – people love the autonomy of circus, you can be yourself, create your own act and identity. It's been my career and passion - I have lived and breathed circus for the last 30 years".*

A perception of Deborah's is that *"Everyone [in the circus world] is operating on their own in New Zealand"*. This is unfortunate given that circus teaching and performance is expensive to produce:

*"There is a need to share, to develop a national data base and strategy and to develop the recognition of circus as an art form - for the circus industry in New Zealand to fulfil its potential".*

Deborah is also clear that the future of the circus industry depends on having a national circus training school. This is a serious goal for the Wellington Circus Trust to pursue but needs a passionate person to drive it.

## Community Circus in Christchurch



Chris Carrow – Professional Clown, Co-Founder of the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology's Circo Arts School, Community Circus provider, involved with the Christchurch Circus Trust.

Chris Carrow has been involved in the circus industry for the last 18 years. In the 1990s he was a tutor in a circus programme for Christchurch City Council and the idea of forming a circus troupe and starting to provide some circus training emerged. With a small group of interested performers and academics, Chris approached the Christchurch

Polytechnic with the idea of providing circus training and the Diploma of Circo Arts was established there in 1995/1996.

This was a two year Diploma teaching a range of circus arts, taking around 20-30 students a year. In 2011 it was approved to become a three year degree, via the Bachelor in Performing Arts (Circus and Physical Theatre). Unfortunately the Christchurch earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 affected the Polytechnic's buildings and operations. The students in the 2011 year went to Melbourne to complete their studies and a decision has yet to be made as to whether the course will be continued.

As well as supporting the Diploma in Circo Arts and being a professional clown (part of the 'Carrot and Pickle' duo with his partner Lisa), Chris has long had an interest in community circus. For the last eight years or so he has provided circus workshops for children, schools and young people and sometimes for adults through the YMCAs, Christchurch City Council events and Sport Canterbury.

The Christchurch Circus Trust (known as the Contemporary Circus Trust prior to 2012) finally found a home base in 2012 called the Christchurch Circus Centre, to provide circus and community circus classes from. These classes are mainly user pays, although Chris is constantly looking for funding support.

A range of community circus classes are provided and to date are breaking even, including after school programmes, classes for 5-7 and 8-13 year olds, one teenage class and specialty classes, including aerials, acrobatic classes and open training times for practitioners. The Trust is also looking at providing a family circus class and one for mums and toddlers. This home base is supported by the Christchurch Circus Trust. The premises are owned by a church organisation, which is reportedly excited about the community circus focus of the Trust.

For Chris, the biggest challenge is "*Letting Christchurch know that we're here – raising our profile, communications, marketing and resourcing that*". Key needs for this organisation are administrative help, proactive Trustees, grants for operating costs and support for marketing and promotion. Chris is a strong supporter of user pays; for tutors being paid properly and for learners to give something in return for learning circus skills:

*"To survive we need to charge and people also need to want to be there, to commit to being there".*

The community circus classes provided are seen as valuable, especially for children:

*"Working with kids you get the chance to see that circus is interesting and worth pursuing".*

The kids reportedly learn about repetition, balance, strength and fitness. At the same time people can be reluctant to pay for circus classes and it can be

challenging to keep people engaged – to build a circus ladder that people can move up in terms of skills. A key issue is having enough tutors in Christchurch, with many professional circus providers not interested in teaching a class for \$25 an hour.

There is reportedly no strong community circus presence in Christchurch at present, with Christchurch Circus Trust being the main provider. Groups doing related activities such as pole work and burlesque exist, but the circus related community in Christchurch is not well networked at present.

Chris would love to obtain funding to follow up Circo Arts graduates to see where they went and what they are doing now – to map their path and movement and see the impact that the Diploma had.

Overall though Chris describes the Christchurch Circus Trust as being in a reasonable situation, with cheap rent, support from the Church leasing the premises and a good space that has high ceilings, four separate spaces and can take 40 children easily. The Centre is at 280 Wilsons Road, Opawa.

## Community Circus in Taranaki

**Daniel Hales, Circus performer and Community Circus worker in New Plymouth**

Daniel has a suite of skills involving physical arts, performance, outdoor training and teaching. He has a Diploma in Circus Arts from Circo Arts in Christchurch. He performed one season with Circus Aotearoa in both aerial and clown acts and performs regularly in Taranaki under the name Kaivayla. Daniel has used community circus as one of many tools in his work with youth at risk and believes it is an amazing tool for community development.

*"For me community circus is utilising the circus skills I've gained and sharing them in various settings. It's a useful tool for people development, in giving people confidence and lots of positive things they can use as adults. It's also a good tool to attract people, and for them to grow and develop. I like its inclusiveness for people of all ages and abilities."*

Daniel initially intended to take circus skills into the class room, but enjoyed learning and performing them so much, he put his formal teacher training on hold. After his Circus Aotearoa run and through meeting other community circus people he realised he could teach circus without getting formal teacher training. Initial training he did in Waldorf education inspired him to go to Circo Arts, and he has now been asked to help deliver in-house circus training for Waldorf teachers.

*"The thing I love about community circus is watching people's personal development. Whether they take part in a half day, full day or week long*



*programme, at the end of a workshop they will come out with huge smiles and a much more positive body posture. They look upright, proud, confident and joyous. And just having an experience that is not available anywhere else creates a great space for the participants and a bonding that can develop into great friendships”.*

Daniel uses Paul Woodhead’s<sup>8</sup> two rules approach of ‘respect the gear and share what you know’.

*“It’s such an accepted model, and people are uplifted by that model. Everyone knows what’s acceptable and if they’re given the space it empowers them to pass on their skills and keep it real”.*

Daniel likes to give people skills they can learn and succeed with quickly, but also more challenging tasks that keep them hooked and motivated towards gaining higher skills.

*“Youth particularly get hooked because the results are so immediate but I like to throw in a flag or something a bit harder. It keeps them real and a bit humble. They realise actually I don’t know it all, but I can learn it”.*

Daniel gathered a lot of support for the circus work he was doing with youth at risk as part of a START<sup>9</sup> programme. This included a lot of physical and outdoor training as well as circus skills. He was very close to setting up an incorporated society called ‘Mobile Circus Inc’, with the aim of delivering circus programmes for young people, particularly in small rural communities in Taranaki. He had a team in support and documents ready to sign when a difficult experience with a troubled youth gave him pause to re-evaluate his work and goals. He decided his skill set was better suited to supporting and teaching those committed to working with youth in their own communities, and that that would have greater impact. He is now facilitating workshops including circus body work and improvisation for community workers. He still runs the occasional community circus holiday programme because *“there is a real hunger for more of those”*.

His work with START and local councils has lead him to help create spaces in towns for people in small communities who work with youth, to come with their young people to learn community circus tools and skills to take back to their own community.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Woodhead has been a driver behind bringing circus programmes into schools in Australia and is the Founding Director of Circus West, see <http://circuswest.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.cyf.govt.nz/youth-justice/fresh-start.html> - Fresh Start programmes work with persistent young offenders.

*"I'm not hanging on to the ball but giving it to people to use in their own community if they wish. It's about giving the passionate people in the community the tools and upskilling people at the coalface."*

Daniel thinks community circus has definitely become more accepted and mainstream and there is more awareness of what it is and that it is on offer. He is confident that he would be fully employed delivering community circus if he had the time to focus on that. He is particularly keen to provide community circus in small centres, not just the bigger towns.

*"There is a real hunger for more holiday programmes, and a number of people who would love me to do more community circus but I don't have the time to commit. For real growth there needs to be more teachers and someone to drive it".*

Daniel says every time he runs longer workshops – for two or three days there are always youth interested in helping to deliver more community circus in their communities but they don't have the experience to drive the programmes themselves. Various people have pledged support to find funding or spaces, so the support would be there if someone could focus on making it happen.

# International Community Circus Leaders

## American Youth Circus Organisation (AYCO)

Zoe Brookes, Board member (former Executive Director). Zoe also founded Stone Soup Circus in Princeton, New Jersey in 2008.



### History and approach

AYCO started in 1998. It aims to serve the whole youth circus sector in the United States through informing, convening, standard setting and advocating. They are a charity with 350 members, ranging from small programmes to highly auditioned and paid performance troupes. With a professional planning background Zoe led AYCO through five year strategic planning in 2009. She got involved in community circus through her children.

Almost all of the bigger community circus groups within AYCO are not for profits but Stone Soup Circus is a for-profit company with a social cause. Princeton, New Jersey was an affluent community without a community circus group. Students pay rates similar to what they might pay for an art class or sport. Staff earn what they would if they worked in a local store.

*"I didn't mean for it to be a for-profit company but the administration of not for profits is much harder, and who wants to give money to privileged children to juggle"?*

Zoe donates her time as Director.

### What has worked

*"People in the community circus world tend to measure success based on how it feels rather than budgets or how high you can jump. For me the intensity of activity indicates success".*

### **Be inclusive and non-competitive**

Inclusion and non-competition have been key ingredients for success. There is a culture in circus of looking after your own.

*"Circus has been very successful when it has opened its doors and said 'Come in, and we'll figure out how you fit'".*

AYCO has opened doors for members and allows new groups in particular to access expertise, resources and advice very quickly.

Collaboration has helped some groups, by finding a local group with an existing infrastructure e.g. a YMCA or school, a family or an entire village they can attach themselves to before becoming a stand-alone group. Groups that Zoe has seen succeed within AYCO have been willing to do what's possible within the budget.

### ***Build the pool of teachers***

Groups quickly find they need more teachers than are available, and AYCO has helped in addressing that barrier. It has facilitated many people into the community circus teaching realm.

*"We've discovered that if you find a willing, physical person who wants to teach, it's possible to get them to a point where they can help in a circus class by sending them to one of the more established AYCO members for training or an Educators conference. We know and help each other so it's affordable and really helpful".*

### ***Ability to connect, engage and include is most important***

Stone Soup Circus has built a substantial community circus programme using only beginner to intermediate level skills.

*"It's important not to teach what you can't do, and to seek assistance with technical aspects. I love having high skills teachers but I will always choose someone who gets inclusion and connectivity over technical skills. Good teachers understand learning, are prepared to look children in the eye and meet them where they're at, can lay down the rules, hold the space and bring people together".*

### ***Bring in people who have different skills***

Stone Soup tried a really wide range of different programmes and models to see what worked best. An early connection with the local arts council provided opportunities for performances and programmes that raised their visibility. Their biggest barriers have been finding space and getting sufficient insurance to rent that space. Overcoming that has been about building relationships so people want to help you make it work.

*"I've hit barriers in my own capacity – things I'm not very good at, so I've tried to let other people in, particularly older students to take over areas I wasn't managing well or didn't have the skills for".*

At first Stone Soup took on any community gig to raise visibility but found that exhausting and difficult to calendar. They now hold two shows annually that include everybody and ad hoc shows with a small group of kids. Once the circus started to turn a profit, they paid those children for paid performances or workshops.

*"Paying teenagers means it stays being their main interest".*

The current economic environment hasn't impacted much as social circus groups are "so good at managing on a shoestring". Groups that may have had a fall in numbers attending or a shortfall in funding have looked for ways to survive, such as renegotiating rent. Zoe feels that this has probably made some groups more efficient.

## What supports community circus to flourish

### **Develop strategic relationships**

Building relationships with people that will help you get where you want to go and letting others in is key to success.

*"On a local basis groups doing good work have made friends with good funders".*

Most of the AYCO members are collaborative by nature.

*"AYCO is showing that there is a growing community that is stronger because it is helping each other. A strong AYCO means it is easier for new circus to grow, to connect quickly, be inspired and get training".*

### **Invest in safety**

AYCO are now moving towards setting up guidelines for preserving safety in the sector and are beginning to have some kind of accreditation process. It is hoped that this will help groups overcome insurance barriers. Insurance companies don't understand what they are insuring so tend to charge more.

### **Leadership**

Strong leadership is important. Behind every successful organisation there is usually one person with an enormous amount of drive. More strong people may get involved and share leadership. "Success has been where someone has said 'I'm going to lead this but it's not all about me'.

## Insights, lessons and advice for New Zealand community circus

*"The first thing I usually say as a leader trying to get things going is to 'be prepared to be very vulnerable'. I think it's better to need something rather than going out trying to help people. If anyone ever offered something that they thought might fit it, I tried to say 'Yes'".*

Zoe asked the same question hundreds of times: "I'm here and I'm starting a circus and anyone can be part of it, what can you bring?" She had a clear vision of what the circus could look like but no budget or auditions. "I never advertised. I invited people to come join the local CC group".

AYCO looked at European models for best practice and dysfunctions.

*"It's very tempting when you start an organisation to then start drawing distinctions between one another. Don't start that. Instead ask: Do you care about circus? YES? Okay come in and find out how we can work together and let the differences lie. Be really careful about drawing boundaries".*

## Cirque du Soleil

Bernard Yu: Global Citizenship Director  
– Asia Pacific

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL



Cirque du Soleil and Jeunesse du Monde created a social circus programme Cirque du Monde in 1995, which targets at-risk youth and is now operating in more than 80 communities worldwide. Cirque du Soleil partners with local organisations working with at-risk youth and provides advice, training and educational tools.

In 2000 Cirque du Soleil, in association with circus schools and other interested partners, set up an international training programme aimed at developing the teaching skills of social circus instructors and community workers. Today, over 2,000 participants have taken part in the training. Together with the National Circus School of Canada, Cirque du Soleil developed a number of educational tools for social circus practitioners.

Cirque du Soleil works exclusively with youth-at-risk whose situation often varies from country to country, region to region. Therefore the mapping process (understanding the specific social, cultural, political, educational, etc., situation) plays an integral role before any actions are started. In certain regions, linguistic and cultural diversity among countries can also be a challenge.

Cirque du Soleil emphasizes taking what they call a pedagogical (educational) approach. *"We believe we have the optimal model – combining artists (circus instructors) with community workers (mostly known as social workers), with both involved from the start. It is different from the community circus model seen in Australia, where the artists are working with the wider community and doing the bulk of the community work as well."* Cirque du Soleil also acknowledges that social circus can come in many forms and is often based on specific regional, cultural, and social factors, as well as some limitations that organisations face in their communities.

Cirque du Soleil has changed the way it support social circus programmes in the last few years as it seeks social circus partners (circuses, non-profits, community centres, etc) that have a successful track record in running social circus

programmes (sustainability), strong administration and support base, and significant reach (number of at risk-youth supported). Cirque du Soleil supports its partners by providing educational tools<sup>10</sup>, training and advice.

In some cases, if there is great potential and need, Cirque du Soleil supports organisations with developing and structuring programmes.

*"We now spend more time researching (i.e.: mapping) and getting to know all the partners on a case by case regional basis – it may take time before programmes are established by the local partner. We tell organisations exactly what's involved and the commitment needed."*

This can be challenging at times as it can involve promoting social circus to groups that don't have any circus history in their country.

*"Many social organisations, non-profits and community centres appear to have common and recurring challenges: long hours, low wages, understaffing, and here we are proposing a new program (social circus) that they often have never heard of. Therefore, it's not surprising that their reaction sometimes is a little muted, but it's ultimately a matter of them choosing programmes that have the greatest impact on the youth they work with and that are sustainable."*

Programme funding has proved to be problematic at times.

*"Programme funding from the start is not always the best option. Groups were either running programmes because they had the money - so had to deliver, or they became too reliant on the money".*

Programme funding is now limited and only provided to organisations that display 'Best Practices' in social circus and adopt the educational approach encouraged by Cirque du Soleil (i.e.: Cirque du Monde partners).

When Cirque du Soleil identifies established social circus practitioners and organisations committed to starting social circus programmes in a country or region, it gives them access to its educational tools, which are downloadable free of charge on an online sharing platform called BOX, which also serves as a message board for social circus practitioners.

A social circus training programme is then planned (over 5 days and 40 hours). It's essential that programmes start as soon as possible after the training. A follow-up training, part two, can then be scheduled. The optimal number of participants for this kind of training is approximately 20 persons. Cirque du Soleil provides two social circus trainers as well as a training site and training material. The

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<sup>10</sup> For example *Basic Techniques in Circus Arts* - a multimedia kit including a DVD and manuals in PDF format.

training is free of charge and priority is given to circus instructors (artists) and community workers already involved in social circus programmes.

Cirque du Soleil has broadened its social circus programmes to include other art forms, to keep them relevant. For example, workshops include classical circus activities but may also include dance, music, or even martial arts. Organisations should consider paying instructors for every workshop (a small fee to cover preparation and delivery).

To maximise their impact on youth, workshops should be held regularly (at least once a week) and programmes should be offered for an extended period of time (e.g.: 30 weeks). Ideally, workshops should take place at the same time and in the same location. Also if possible, at the end of the series of workshops, participants should present a circus performance or demonstration to the local community. Finally programmes should be continued annually.

Cirque du Soleil focuses more on partner/programme quality than on numbers of partners/programmes. It constantly re-evaluates its approach but has always been challenged by evaluation.

*"Corporate sponsors often want quantitative facts –but self- esteem is difficult to quantify. Certainly the number of youth in programmes counts, but capturing changes in youth at risk, to tell their stories, remains a challenge."*

Success may be getting kids off the streets or going to school - for orphans, it may be reunification with families. Organisations get testimonials from parents, staff, youth workers and kids to show the changes made, but they differ from one youth to the next.

Over the years there has been a lot of talk among social circus providers about standardisation, or of forming an association of international membership to address issues of consistency, quality, health and safety.

*"Global conversations are important but it's not Cirque du Soleil's role to form an international federation. That probably needs an individual or group of organisations to take it on and it will be a big task to get the structure, vision, mission, bylaws, leadership structure, etc, right, so is probably a long way off."*

Starting with low impact, low risk skills in programmes helps with health and safety issues, and it is hoped that educational tools such as the "Basic Techniques in Circus Arts" will help further. Publications also help groups get some consistency. *"Getting liability insurance is just beyond the scope of a lot of groups in Asia and most probably many operate without it. In some cases, the organisations' general overall insurance may cover some risk."*



## What supports community circus to flourish?

Some of the key elements that Cirque du Soleil sees in helping programmes succeed are:

- Having consistent, ongoing and continuous programmes  
*"Real benefits come from having programmes that run at least once a week at the same time, in the same location, with the same workers."*
- Connecting with other organisations with history and success running social circus programs
- Developing a pool of circus instructors and having community workers on board. For example, in Mongolia where the programme reaches street kids, Save the Children (the local partner) takes care of connecting kids with their families  
*"Circus instructors teach circus skills because that's their speciality so having a community worker involved helps address individual issues that the youth may be experiencing."*
- Laying the foundation and framework first, with the commitment needed from each partner clearly defined
- Having a narrow focus is an advantage, i.e. at-risk youth; different target groups need different approaches, evaluation and methodology  
*"It may be possible to develop a worldwide methodology or workshop structure if delivering to the same focus group, but street kids will have a different model to orphans, abused, poverty, drug addicts, etc."*

## Insights, lessons and advice for New Zealand community circus

Bernard advises having a focused approach (e.g. target at-risk youth), getting the framework and foundations right first; and partnering circus artists (instructors) with social/youth/community workers and others with specific skills required and collaborating.

The people involved are probably the single thing that makes the biggest difference to social circus programmes.

*"In addition to the organisations' stability, people, individuals really make things happen. Their heart, drive, passion and will to succeed. The downside is that when they leave, programmes can face challenges. So it's really important to lay the foundation first, to get the organisation and management, approach and knowledge right."*

# Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association (ACAPTA)

Gail Kelly, Director and freelance Director in circus and physical theatre in Australia for the last 20 years

## History and approach

ACAPTA was established in 1999.

*"Circus companies and artists met and decided that they wanted a national body that could advocate and network and develop [circus] as an art form, because most artists were underpaid, overworked and didn't have the time to do it".*

ACAPTA has approximately 250 members who can access the website and receive monthly newsletters, and they host a range of symposiums, conferences, salons and forums such as the national annual Youth Circus Symposium. Through these inclusive events, the circus sector comes together and the community circus sector is always part of all initiatives.

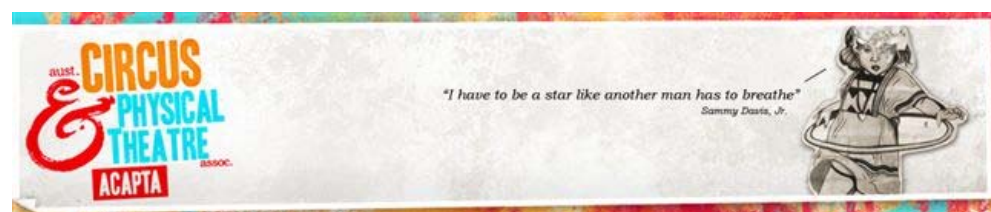
The circus sector as a whole is developing and has had good funding support in the past; however most community circus companies are now stretched, almost to breaking point. With a tighter funding environment there has been a big growth in socially driven circus projects:

*"The circus sector wouldn't have survived without the community circus sector".*

## Challenges

### *Funding and resourcing*

Maintaining funding bases is challenging, given changes in governments, funding personnel and fashion in relation to giving. To survive, circus companies have had to get a bit savvy; diversify, and do a lot more outreach projects. Funding varies from state to state and the programmes that survive are often the ones where long term relationships have been built, for example with schools, and it is usually because of an inspired individual. Health agencies support a number of different models which focus on issues such as self-esteem for young women, and healthy eating and exercise for obese children. Arts funding depends on the artists involved.



*"The funding models are old and unsupportive. We need to get all the government departments sitting around the table – that is happening in Europe".*

A perceived critical moment for Australian community circus was losing the Community Arts Board around five years ago. ACAPTA lost their funding last year.

*"Governments need to support the ongoing development of the industry. The circus sector punches above its weight in every country. Not being supported is disrespectful to our artists, workers; draining on staff and frustrating because we could be doing so much more. We've almost been too good at improvising and doing lots with nothing".*

Furthermore, very few groups have access to purpose built circus buildings.

*"Every youth circus in Australia has a waiting list. Really every community should have a community circus building".*

Despite the challenges the work that is produced is still inspirational.

*"I love the story of Kelly in Cairns who started the Blackrobats Indigenous Community Circus. Fifteen years ago she rocked up to the park with her mats. For me that's the purity of this work. We just keep fronting up and doing it and it changes peoples' lives. Kids who were working with her 10 years ago now help her to keep the project going".*

### **Health and safety and insurance**

Getting insurance is a real challenge in Australia. Companies cannot operate without it and each company can pay up to \$10,000 per annum. All the trainers have to have their own personal indemnity insurance. ACAPTA is trying to negotiate to get companies a sector deal and after five years of dealing with brokers are hopeful of this happening soon.

The youth and community circus sector is writing a policy paper on how they want to accredit their trainers and they have also been talking for years about developing health and safety procedures that can be shared between companies.

### **Governance and structure**

All community circus groups are not for profit but Gail doesn't think that boards work particularly well for the sector.

*"We have to start looking for new ways – boards are often the nightmare for groups".*

Groups can have a difficult 2 – 3 year period of transition from a voluntary community to a formal legal structure.

*"That's where having a network that has had those experiences is really helpful".*

## **What supports community circus to flourish**

### ***Engaging well with communities***

Community circus needs to engage with the multiple communities it serves and see them as critical to the company. A good example is the Flying Fruit Fly Circus in Albury.

*"They engaged a large percentage of the town in the creation and development of the company, and to this day Albury still sees that company as their circus, they are synonymous. Last year they opened a \$5 million dollar purpose built building".*

### ***Committed people***

People are critical to success. Ideally community circuses need two to three passionate driven people.

*"All community circus in Australia was started by someone with passion and vision and they just did it until they burnt out. Unfortunately they didn't have the resources and trainers but groups are now building capacity."*

### ***Being professional, mentoring and quality training***

Most circus companies are now legal entities with paid employment, structures, risk assessment and insurance. Performers are also now returning to the companies they started with. Mentoring projects, bringing in young performers and investing in development are key. All of the youth circuses have models where young participants can train to become trainers. This has reportedly resulted in an incredible resilience in the youth circus sector.

### ***Networking and planning***

Youth Circus has had four symposiums. They are now said to be driven as a sector; know what they want and how to work together. They have research underway and next year are writing the youth circus strategy for Australia.

## **Insights, lessons and advice for New Zealand community circus**

### ***Advocate for government investment in circus***

The Finnish government investment in circus has advanced the sector greatly.

*"They are only 10 years old but ahead of Australia. All the Nordic countries are embracing circus. Finland is small but they have a circus department within government – fantastic".*

### **Collaborate**

Australia and New Zealand could collaborate to share resources and have a wider impact.

*"I am often asked overseas if we work together and we should. Just to be able to pick up the phone...ask how they do this or that. Women's circus in particular is really good at working together and not competing with each other for funding, but the professional sector is quite divided".*

Gail always tells youth companies to work together but to keep their own identity.

*"Work together work together work together".*

### **Work locally to globally**

It is important to work at local, regional, national and international level. Sometimes international success is needed to fuel national recognition.

## Belfast Community Circus School



Will Chamberlain, Director Belfast Community Circus School (BCCS). BCCS is also a member of the CARAVAN youth circus network, which comprises nine large European youth and social circus schools

### **History and approach**

When Will came to BCCS in 1996 it was a small organisation renting a hall for a few weekly classes, with a formal structure, support mechanisms, management committee and charitable status.

In 1999 the School achieved a purpose built circus premises in central Belfast. It runs outreach programmes in socially and economically disadvantaged areas. Their annual Festival of Fools promotes the use of shared public spaces to bring communities together for positive interaction and mutual understanding. This promotes goodwill in the community and helps build a positive reputation.

*"About 80% of Belfast communities still live in nationalist or unionist areas with a patchwork of Catholics and Protestants across that. Not being tied to any community has been BCCS' key to success".*

BCCS has a training school for professional teachers and performers of circus arts. It also acts as a promoter for performers and provides a venue for circus productions.

## What has worked for BCCS

### ***Creating a strong plan***

In the late 1990s BCCS managed to prove the validity of circus as an art form and bid against well established and respected arts institutions for one-off seed funding. They constructed a business plan with logical stages of development to increase capacity by developing professional performers, which would help create a bigger pool of teachers.

### ***Developing a flexible pool of trainers***

They had half a dozen part time trainers and now have 25 - 30, who work with about 400 young people and 50 adults per week. Only the youth director is employed full time and trainers are engaged only one term in advance.

*"Having a pool of trainers offers a bit of flexibility".*

### ***Support performers to become quality teachers***

As inspirational role models, BCCS believe performers make the best teachers and can deliver the end result performance better. They give teachers' tools and youth work training on issues such as how to deal with difficult behaviours. Teaching is about developing skills, techniques and co-operation. The CARAVAN Network has published the "Framework of Competences for Social Circus Trainers", which is available at [www.caravancircusnetwork.eu](http://www.caravancircusnetwork.eu). The next step is a curriculum for developing these competences.

BCCS have always used a high teacher student ratio, currently 8:1 for over 8 year olds and 4:1 for under 8 year olds. They also pay attention to health and safety policies. All classes have more than one teacher to comply with their child protection policy.

### ***Appropriate charging***

A common dilemma for youth circus programmes is the amount to charge participants. The school charges £5 per in-house class whereas it costs £15 to provide - the difference is made up through grants from the Arts Council and Belfast City Council, and there are 900 children on the waiting list. Outreach programmes are free and happen in areas of economic and social disadvantage but the youth circus classes which take place at the school itself have a middle class affluent bias, as those are the parents who tend to bring their children.

*"We started one class for £10 because demand was so high but have a slightly uneasy feeling about doing that".*

Due to limited support for the outreach programmes they tend to be set up on a short term basis, whereas the building based activities are ongoing.

Will is pleased to see government investment in the community circus sector in projects such as Finland's Tampere University social circus research, but

academic interest in community circus has failed to ignite from the universities in Northern Ireland.

*"It seems to need to be financially beneficial [to attract academic interest]. I think changing pathways of young people is economically beneficial".*

*"Success is relative. BCCS has been operating for 27 years but the art gallery across the road is definitely better funded. We seem to have to jump higher and through more hoops than many other professions".*

### **What supports community to flourish**

*"Longevity of projects depends on the motivation of community workers. It's more about key individuals than a template".*

#### ***Hard work, the right people, luck***

The growth of the BCCS reportedly had a lot to do with good timing and fortune. When applying for seed funding they chanced upon a building in a rundown area of the city targeted for arts and cultural development and eventually secured a lease with a right to buy.

*"Coincidence and hard graft seem to be constant factors in success."*

Demand for workshops and performances has always been greater than they could supply.

*"Circus has a very ancient appeal and works well in a contemporary context at achieving the impossible. There are so many amazing gains people can make from wherever they start. After two hours people will have gained obvious progression. It enables participants to take part in a performance that allows them acclamation without exposing their frailties".*

### **Insights, lessons and advice for NZ community circus**

#### ***Be high profile and engage locally and regionally***

Good projects seem to operate best if they are locally and regionally funded. Lots of community circus organisations will develop a performance troupe that tours regionally. It promotes the organisation, increases profile and interest and encourages the start of local projects.

*"I very intentionally engaged with politicians who may not make direct funding decisions but who employ people who do. It is important that elected representatives understand the work and can be called upon if we are threatened financially so they can campaign on our behalf".*

#### ***Collaborate with and support other art forms***

BCCS keep local and regional representatives informed and lobby not just for circus but for the arts and community arts in general. They have built alliances,

informal relationships and exchanged practices with other community arts organisations.

*"Lots of practices are transferable".*

Schools in Northern Ireland don't seem to have the time or money for circus but there are a number of long term projects in schools in London. Some youth circus programmes have been able to develop the social economy more, for example hosting birthday parties.

*"So many things in Northern Ireland are culturally specific. Circus is uniquely successful here because it overcomes that. It works because it is not tied up with identity, it doesn't belong to one side or the other and everyone has an equal right and ownership".*

## Social Circus in Finland

Piia Karkkola – Project manager for the Finnish 'Effective Circus Project' (ECP) and former project assistant for Finland's 'Social Circus Project'



### History and approach

The Effective Circus Project (ECP) is a three year project set up as a continuation of The Social Circus Project (2009 - 2011). It is administered by the Centre for Practice as Research in Theatre at the University of Tampere in Finland.

The ECP aims to create jobs for circus professionals and help circus organisations to become better employers of circus professionals in social and applied circus.

Its three main goals are to:

- Improve dialogue between circus organisations and cities
- Increase wellbeing outcomes gained from circus
- Study the effects of circus and develop evaluation methods to capture the effects of circus workshops on their target audience

The Social Circus Project (2009-2011) was initiated by Sorin Sircus, a youth circus in Tampere. They wanted a social circus project on a national level, but the administration and finances were quite large for an association to administer (\$648 000 Euros), so Tampere University's Centre of Practice as research in Theatre took on the administration role. The Social Circus Project involved seven circus projects. The ECP is a European Social Fund project, which is partly funded by the Lapland Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment. Other funders include five cities.



Having European Social Fund funding makes circus wellbeing projects easy to sell to cities and organisations. The biggest challenge in Finland for circus wellbeing services will be to continue without the ESF subsidy. The participation fee that cities pay for the project is reportedly quite low given the amount of circus workshops they get for the money. But the cities are also required to participate in the research and the project's seminars. One of the pilot circuses in ECP already sells every workshop directly to different organizations during the project. They clearly state the amount of ESF subsidy and how it affects the cost of a project or a workshop.

*"Some of the circus' are thinking of the future; looking at a model where 30% of funding comes from the city, 30% from projects and 30% from participants. It might work for some groups but will not be so easy for the remote regions".*

Circus has been recognised by the Finnish Arts Council as its own art form since 1990; before that it sat under agriculture (because circus traditionally involves animals). The rise of the new circus in Finland began with the emergence of a very strong network of youth circuses. With a population of only 5 million people in Finland, there are almost 40 youth circuses. All of the groups are non-profit associations. They get funding from different arts and culture national, city or youth funding sources.

Wellbeing circus services are offered to participants for free - the cities and ESF funding covers the costs. The target groups are varied with participants including elderly, school children, babies and parents and families.

More information on the ECP can be found at [www.vaikuttavasirkus.fi](http://www.vaikuttavasirkus.fi) and more information about the Finnish circus scene at [www.sirkusinfo.fi](http://www.sirkusinfo.fi).

## What supports community circus to flourish

### **Good staff**

*"Social circus teachers can't be forced. You need enthusiastic teachers really enjoying what they are doing".*

### **Clear goals and good administration**

Most of the groups operate in schools or with another partner; therefore cooperation must be very clear. Both groups must know why they are providing social circus and what they want to achieve.

*"Everyone needs to be clear about their roles and how the organisation works - what are the goals, what is the strategy. It is important to get everyone in the project on the same page".*

### **Staff meetings and talking to the partners about the methods employed.**

*"It's important the circus meets with the partner organisation in the beginning, middle and end of the project."*

The ECP encourages the circus organisations to draw up contracts with partners where they discuss:

- goals
- funding
- who is responsible for what
- safety
- who takes care of insurance
- what happens if a circus teacher is sick or a group doesn't turn up.

### **Evaluation**

*"The Social Circus Project published "Social Circus: A Guide to Good Practices" in 2012, for which we needed feedback. In the beginning it was difficult for the teachers to find time for evaluation. We created forms for them and forced the circus teachers to use them in every lesson. We don't monitor that anymore".*

Having two circus teachers in each class alongside school teachers or partners in the organisation helps with evaluation:

*"Evaluation can come quite naturally with two teachers in each class. They naturally talk about the projects with each other and give each other support and feedback".*

### **Preparation classes for partners**

Piia thinks it has been very effective for groups starting new partnerships, to have the circus give lessons to the nurses, teachers and so on first, so they can really understand what social circus is all about.

*"People don't really know what circus is; you need to show them what it can be and how fun it can be".*

### **Networking**

Getting to know your community, your city, who decides where the funds go, developing relationships with funders and lobbying for funding is critical.

*"ECP have a national role - to keep the flag of Social Circus high; to contact newspapers, etc. but it is important for groups to have local contacts".*

The ECP has seen particular success in a number of elderly projects.

*"Some of the nursing homes are looking at cutting back on the amount of physio they do because circus is more effective. There is a different*

*motivation for doing things, it's more fun. I'm not lifting my arm 50 times, I'm juggling. Circus is also more social - people meet each other and have fun. Laughter is recognised as very important and nurses throw themselves at projects, which breaks down the strict environment in some of the homes".*

### Insights, lessons and advice for New Zealand community circus

In Finland the cities are becoming more interested in buying bigger workshops or programmes combined with different art forms. Piia thinks it is important to network with other organisations in your local community such as sports, youth or culture groups.

*"Look at who your competitors are - they are seeking the same pool of money. Learn from them and try to cooperate at some level".*

## European Youth Circus Organisation (EYCO)

Karl Koeckenberger, co-founder and member of EYCO

Karl is also:

- Founder and CEO of Cabuwazi in Berlin, one of Germany's largest children and youth circus organisations with five circus tents in Berlin offering free access to youth
- Co-founder of NICE (Network of International Circus Exchange)
- Member of:
  - CARAVAN (a European network of seven large youth circus groups)
  - EFD/EVS (European Voluntary Service)
  - BAG (National working group for youth circuses)
  - LAG (District working group for youth circuses)

### EYCO history and approach

EYCO is the umbrella organisation for the national youth circus organisations in European countries. EYCO was developed in 2009 out of the Network of International Circus Exchange (NICE). The first NICE meeting in 2005 involved 34 circus organisations from 13 countries. NICE is now made up of five national umbrella groups and four members who are in the process of establishing national umbrellas. Together they represent over 500 schools or groups and approximately half a million people that practice circus arts. Their approach is:

- Exchange on a European level
- Initiation and support of national circus network organisations
- Promotion of youth circus as a means for children and youngsters to take an active role in society and engage in social citizenship.

The first EYCO working group formulated a set of goals for the organisation:

- Support quality improvement
- Support structural development
- Make information accessible to those working in the field
- Lobby to create a clear view of circus and find funding
- Network with related partners
- Promote youth circus with the general public
- Stimulate intercultural dialogue
- Stimulate research and facilitate publication of research, data and evaluation
- Stimulate recognition of circus as an art form in all European countries

### **What has worked**

Karl identifies the following criteria as factors for success.

#### ***Be open and accessible***

Karl sees circus as social, non-competitive and available to everybody. In Germany community circus groups are mainly 'Children and Youth Circus' but inclusive models exist that are open to different abilities and cultures. Cultural and ethnic diversity within groups can bring challenging group dynamic issues to the fore, particularly between gangs or youth at risk groups, but for Karl this is exactly what community circus excels at addressing. "*Why call it social circus? It is social by nature.*"

#### ***Give youth ownership of the circus space***

At Cabuwazi in Berlin, "the youth know the circus is their place to practice and they are part of decision making and planning. They don't need to enrol, there are no fees and the tents are open for everybody at any time."

#### ***Collaborate with schools***

Since 1996 Cabuwazi has been working together with schools in a number of projects involving a range of classes, some spanning a whole year and involving two or more schools. There are active lunch break circus classes and programmes developed for a day, week, month, year or even multi-year projects. This is supported by schools having a 'social space' orientation, where children are encouraged to interact in open environments.

#### ***Work at an international level***

Cabuwazi both attends festivals and invites international groups to their events. Karl sees the EYCO youth exchange programmes between partner groups as key to motivating and stimulating both students and the partner groups. The annual EYCO meetings are also important to stay in contact, exchange and motivate each other.

### ***Have good trainers***

Karl thinks that it is crucial to use motivated, qualified and well paid trainers in long term contracts, which gives the trainers security and reflects back into the circus programmes in terms of long term goals and achievements. There is a need for experienced teachers with a wealth of knowledge and connections who can pass on skills to young teachers who connect well with students and bring fresh ideas and energy to programmes.

### ***Get support from the local community***

Like many groups, Cabuwazi grew out of the community and local support remains just as important to their success today. *"Always keep looking for and building support from parents and the community"*.

### **What supports community circus to flourish**

Some of the key elements in helping programmes succeed that Karl has seen for EYCO member groups or at Cabuwazi are:

- Cultural and economic diversity within groups
- Connecting with the local community, staging local shows and presentations
- Developing international connections and partnerships with other circus groups and with other towns e.g. building on existing sister-city arrangements
- Establishing opportunities for ongoing dialogue between the groups, managers and teachers
- Engagement at local, regional, national and international level
- Development of a number of funding sources e.g. providing training for unemployed as well as youth at risk funding, school programmes etc
- Staging good presentations or shows
- Having good office and management practices
- Being open to everyone which helps address problems between cultural groups, gangs etc

### **Insights, lessons and advice for New Zealand community circus**

Karl advises most importantly that groups "Talk to each other!!!" Each group needs to find their own profile, focus and identity and stay focused on that, but should work within a network of other groups.

*"Avoid confrontation, it takes too much energy. Instead look for the strengths in each group and how you can bring things together to support each other and raise the profile on a national level"*.

# Appendix One: Participant Websites

Where available, the website contacts for participants in this report are provided below, in alphabetical order.

American Youth Circus Organisation	<a href="http://www.americanyouthcircus.org/">www.americanyouthcircus.org/</a>
Auckland Community Circus	<a href="http://www.communitycircus.co.nz/">www.communitycircus.co.nz/</a>
Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association	<a href="http://acapta.org.au/">http://acapta.org.au/</a>
Belfast Community Circus School	<a href="http://www.belfastcircus.org/">www.belfastcircus.org/</a>
Christchurch Circus Trust	<a href="http://www.chchcircus.com">www.chchcircus.com</a>
Circus Kumarani	<a href="http://www.circuskumarani.co.nz/">www.circuskumarani.co.nz/</a>
Cirque du Soleil	<a href="http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/">www.cirquedusoleil.com/</a>
Social Circus in Finland	<a href="http://www.sirkusinfo.fi">www.sirkusinfo.fi</a>
Wellington Circus Trust	<a href="http://www.circus.org.nz/">www.circus.org.nz/</a>