

### The Galilee Circus Summer Institute Proposal

In the fall of 2003, with a seed grant from the Mirkam Initiatives of the Abraham Fund, the Galilee Circus began to recruit potential young Jewish and Arab performers from Karmiel and the surrounding Arab villages. A dozen Arabs and a dozen Jews, ages 10-15, began weekly “circus school” classes in December, where they all were coached in juggling, acrobatics, and clowning by a multicultural professional faculty. The group met in a public school gym in Karmiel, and as the weeks went by, solidified into a close-knit “circus family.” Not only the performers, but the staff also became part of a cohesive community.

For those of us who had thought of a circus as a unique means for fostering Arab-Jewish understanding and cooperation, this was a dream come true; all of our theories were validated:

- Circus as an activity based on non-verbal communication and hence transcending language barriers.
- Circus as a non-competitive community based on mutual trust and support.
- Circus as a tradition of an itinerant multi-cultural community, or “family.”
- Circus as an activity whose sole purpose is to make people smile.

The debut performances of Galilee Circus were held in several schools and community centers in Karmiel and Majd El Krum, to a combined audience of about 1,000. As word spread, the group was invited to perform at summer camps and on Israeli Educational Television, and invitations have continued to arrive for the fall. After holding our breaths out of concern that we really would find enough kids, that they really would be able to work together, that they really would stick out the year, that they really would give a creditable performance after only six months of practice, we all breathed easily in June – and even choked up a bit, when in the curtain call, the kids stopped the music and said to the crowd, “The Galilee Circus *family* thanks you with all our heart!”

By 2005-6, the circus had grown to fifty participants – half Jewish children and teens from Karmiel, and half from the Moslem villages of Dir El Assad and Majd el Krum. The response in the community has made it clear that we are doing something significant here, for the participants and their parents, for the audiences, for the country. It is crucial that this circus family continue to grow in skill and in numbers, and take its place as a permanent institution in the Galilee, demonstrating what is possible here.

Circus is a special language, of course, allowing people from different cultures and backgrounds (in our case, speaking different languages) to communicate, to build mutual trust and support, and to become part of a common culture. The Galilee Circus kids call themselves a family. We envision, in the long term, this circus as the basis for a multicultural center serving the Galilee, providing varied opportunities for common cultural experiences and cooperation between Jewish and Arab Israelis.

For the summer of 2007, we are proposing to run a summer institute for two weeks in July or August that would include one week of touring and two weeks of intensive circus work, including coaching, master classes, guest artists, and public performances, along with age-appropriate social and recreational programs. Participants would be drawn from the older age range of the present circus group (about 15 kids), and an equal number of youth from North America youth circus performers.

Purposes:

- Develop the circus skills of the participants
- Give the North American kids a unique and moving Israel experience
- Break down inter-group barriers, and demonstrate cooperative effort and learning
- Draw public attention to the Galilee Circus
- Bring joy to the Galilee



The Circus Day Foundation from St. Louis, Missouri in the United States has agreed to be partners in this venture. The Circus Day Foundation is a social circus organization that uses circus arts to motivate social change. By inspiring individuals and connecting communities with circus education and entertainment programs, they work to have a positive impact on the St. Louis area and beyond. They will send members of their advanced youth circus troupe, the St. Louis Arches, to join us in Israel for this innovative experience.

The St. Louis Arches are comprised of children aged 7 – 16 years old. They perform a wide variety of circus skills including tumbling, trapeze, juggling, stilt walking, tightrope walking, unicycling, rolling globe, mini-trampoline, partner acrobatics and bareback riding. The Arches perform regularly inside their home at City Museum and at special events around St. Louis and around the country. They have been honored to perform with Cirque Du Soleil, Circus Flora and Ringing Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus.

The Circus Day Foundation was founded in 2001 to provide circus educational and community opportunities for St. Louis youth. Since 1989, Circus Day Foundation's founder, Jessica Hentoff, had directed the St. Louis Arches youth circus troupe under the auspices of a one ring circus called Circus Flora. When Circus Flora folded its youth programs, Circus Day Foundation was started to keep these programs going. Their circus school is located inside City Museum, St. Louis's most unusual cultural attraction.

Ms. Hentoff's remarkable vision and use of circus arts to build character and community has brought about ground-breaking and bridge-building programs like *Circus Salaam Shalom* (with Jewish and Muslim children), *Far East Meets Midwest* (with Asian and Mid-western arts and artists) and *Circus Harmony* (with children from different backgrounds and music from different cultures). These trademarks of the Circus Day Foundation are the embodiment of the organization's mission to help children "defy gravity, soar with confidence and leap over social barriers, all at the same time."

Since 2001, Circus Day Foundation has gone from ten students to over 1200 students, through its numerous outreach programs. Their circus students have gone from presenting 40 shows a year to over 400 shows a year. Over 80% of the population served are from low-income families.

Circus Day's motto is "We teach the art of life through circus education." Circus Day has shown that their programs teach valuable life skills like persistence, focus, tolerance and teamwork. Learning circus with others teaches trust, responsibility and cooperation. They focus on giving children the opportunity to meet and interact with children from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds than their own. However, this will be the first time these children have gone outside of America to do so.

In the world today, there is intolerance, hatred and war. Racial slurs and stereotypes abound. Racial profiling is commonplace. Many would say the world is in discord. The Circus Day Foundation promotes peace through pyramids, joy through juggling and harmony through handsprings. They believe the path to peace is a path of cooperation and communication. Teaching children from different neighborhoods how to stand on each other's shoulders may seem like a strange way to take this path. But it's the technique used by the Circus Day Foundation!

The similar philosophies of the Galilee Foundation for Value Education and the Circus Day Foundation make them natural partners. While the members of the Galilee Circus and the St. Louis Arches are having the most amazing time of their lives as they share circus skills with each other and across Israel, they will be showing the world that is really doesn't matter where you are from or what your background is, it is who YOU are and what YOU do that makes a difference. This cross-cultural, country-connecting circus will demonstrate in a breath-taking way what can happen when people of different nationalities and backgrounds build something together. These are only children--- but they have a lot to teach the rest of the world.