

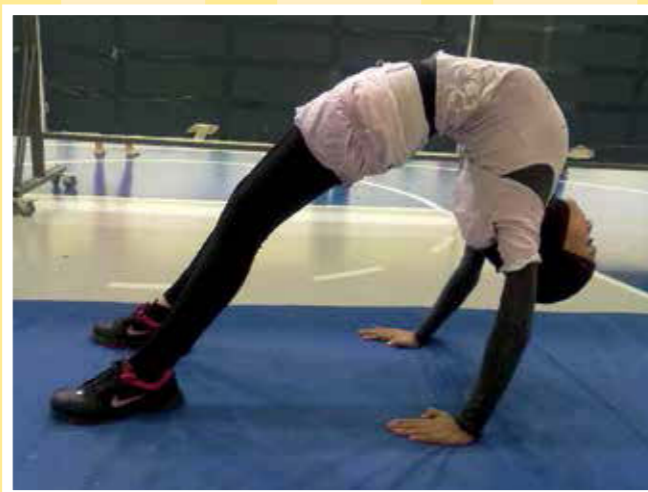


Over the course of the four years that **Cynthia Levinson** spent researching and writing *Watch Out for Flying Kids!*, she traveled to St. Louis and Israel as well as to Chicago, Saratoga, and Sarasota. She conducted more than 120 hours of interviews in three languages (two with translators), in person as well as via telephone, e-mail, Facebook video and messaging, and Skype.

Cynthia Levinson is the author of the award-winning, critically acclaimed middle grade book *We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March*. She holds degrees from Wellesley College and Harvard University and also attended the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. A former teacher and educational policy consultant and researcher, she has published articles in *Appleseeds*, *Calliope*, *Cobblestone*, *Dig*, *Faces*, and *Odyssey*. She lives in Texas and Massachusetts.

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**"You can do everything
that you think is the right thing....
When you think the right thing,
you know it is the right thing."**

—Hla

**"Teaching children from
different cultures
to stand on each other's shoulders may seem
like a strange way to
promote cooperation and
communication,
but it's the technique we use."**

—Jessica

**"I see the whole
big old world,
not just the small place
I live in."**

—Iking



Levinson

WATCH OUT FOR FLYING KIDS!



**How Two Circuses, Two Countries,
and Nine Kids Confront Conflict
and Build Community**

Cynthia Levinson

978-1-56145-821-9

\$22.95

Can you imagine juggling knives—while balancing on a rolling globe? How about catching someone who is flying toward you after springing off a mini-trampoline? And what about planning these tricks with kids who speak different languages?

Welcome to the world of youth social circus—an arts education movement that brings together young people from varied backgrounds to perform remarkable acts on a professional level.

In this engaging and colorful new book, Cynthia Levinson follows nine teenage troupers in two circuses. The members of Circus Harmony in St. Louis are inner-city and suburban kids. The Galilee Circus in Israel is composed of Jews and Arabs. When they get together, they confront racism in the Midwest and tribalism in the Middle East, as they learn to overcome assumptions, animosity, and obstacles, physical, personal, and political.

Join them as they cheer each other with a *ta da!* and a *sababa!*

A portion of proceeds from sales of this book will be donated to the Reggie Moore Memorial Scholarship of Circus Harmony and to the Galilee Circus.

PEACHTREE
ATLANTA



**How Two Circuses, Two Countries, and Nine Kids
Confront Conflict and Build Community**

Cynthia Levinson


P E A C H T R E E
A T L A N T A





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With boundless gratitude to Hala Asadi, Hla Asadi,
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and Roey Shafran, and to Jessica Hentoff and Rabbi Marc Rosenstein.

May you continue to soar.

Salaam سلام

Shalom שלום

Peace

—C. L.

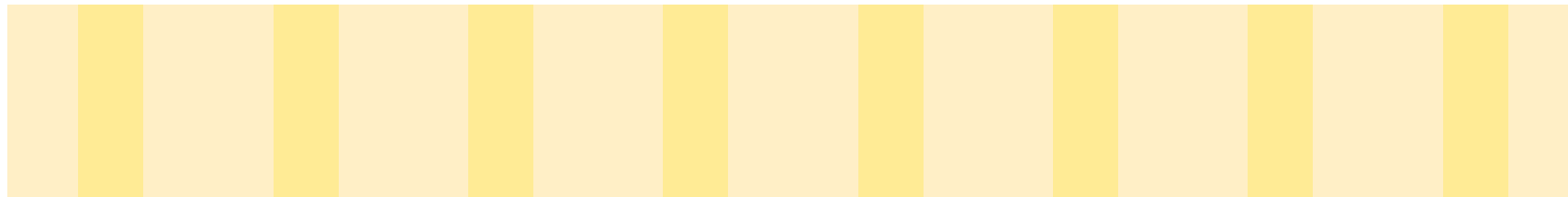




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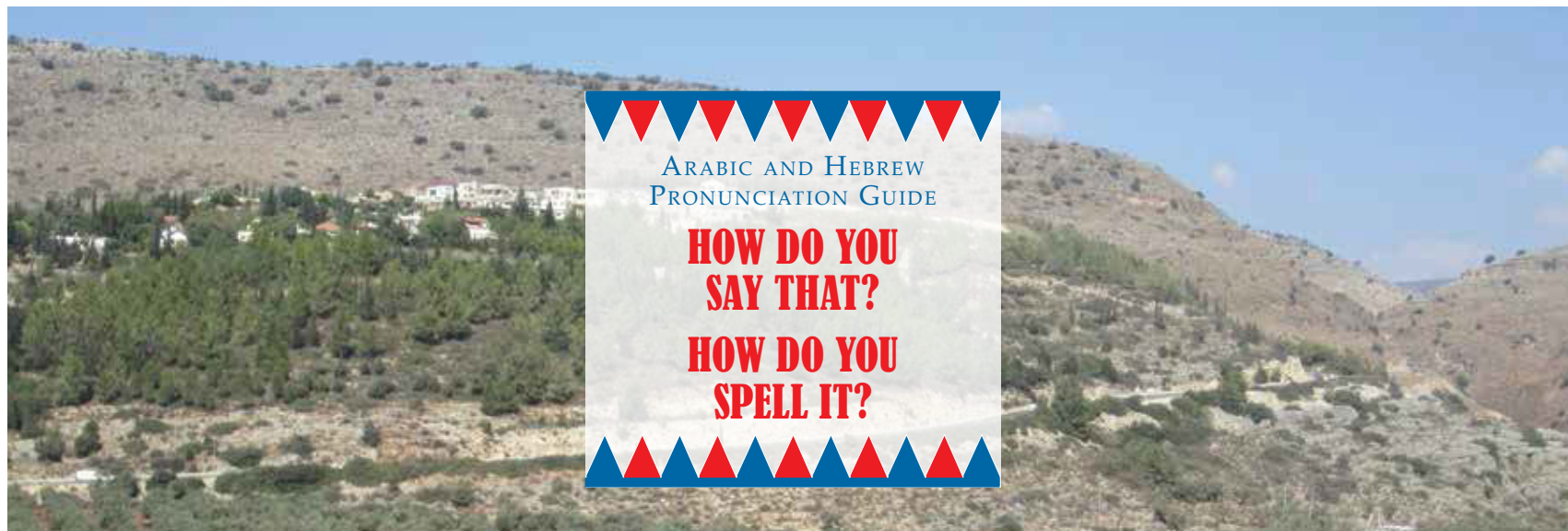
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Arabic and Hebrew words appear throughout this book. Both are official languages of Israel.

Arabic and Hebrew use two different alphabets; English uses a third. Some letters and sounds in Arabic and Hebrew do not correspond to any letters or sounds in English—or to each other. Transliterating names, words, and sounds from one language to another can be challenging, and translators do not necessarily agree on the best way to spell a word in another language.

This Guide shows the approximate pronunciation of the Arabic and Hebrew names, places, and words and expressions in *Watch Out for Flying Kids*. It also indicates which are Arabic (A), which are Hebrew (H), and which Arabic words have been adopted by Hebrew-speakers (A/H). (Personal names are not identified as either Arab or Hebrew because some are imported from other languages.)

In *Watch Out for Flying Kids*, geographical names are spelled the way they appear on most maps. Personal names are spelled the way that the people themselves choose to spell them, since they know at least some English.

Note that

- “ah” sounds like the “a” in “father.”
- “ch” indicates a guttural sound—like pronouncing the sound of the letter “h” while gargling, not as in “chew.”
- “gh” is a hard “g,” as in “go,” rather than soft, as in “gee.”

The Lower Galilee





ARABIC AND HEBREW PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Personal Names

Ahmad Sanallah
Ahmed Asadi
Ali Hasarme
Amit Gelman
Aya Aa'mar
Dagan Dishbak
Dana Raz
Einat Opalin
Fatmi Ali
Gilad Finkel
Hala Asadi
Hanni Podlipsky
Hanoch Shafran
Hla Asadi
Leonid Tzipkis
Manal Asadi
Manar Asadi
Mysa Kabat
Noam Davidovich
Roey Shafran
Saeed Assaf
Saher Sanallah
Salam Abu Zeid
Samer Sanallah
Shai Ben Yosef
Shirel Mondrik
Tamer Sanallah
Yaron Davidovich

ACH-mahd
ACH-med
AH-lee
ah-MEET
ah-yah
dah-GAHN
DAH-na
ay-NOT
FAHT-me
gheel-AHD
CHAH-lah
CHAH-nee
hah-NOCH
HAH-lah
lay-oh-NEED
mah-NAHL
mah-NAR
MY-suh
NO-ahm
roe-EE
sah-EED
SAH-her
sah-LAHM
SAH-mare
SHY
shee-REL
TAH-mare
yah-RONE

SAH-nah-lah
AH-sah-de
hah-SAR-may
GHEL-mahn
ah-MER
DEESH-bahk
RAHZ
oh-pah-LEEN
AH-lee
FEEN-kle
AH-sah-dee
pod-LEEP-skee
shah-FRAHN
AH-sah-dee
TZEEP-kees
AH-sah-dee
AH-sah-dee
KAH-baht
dah-VEED-o-veetch
shah-FRAHN
ah-SAHF
SAH-nah-lah
AH-boo Zade
SAH-nah-lah
ben YO-sef
MON-dreek
SAH-nah-lah
dah-VEED-o-veetch





WATCH OUT FOR FLYING KIDS!

Place Names

Al-Aqsa (A)	ahl AHK-sah
Atzmon (H)	ahts-MONE
Bet Kessler (H)	bate KESS-lehr
Biane (A)	beh-AY-neh
Deir al-Asad (A)	DARE ahl AH-sahd
Galil (H)	gah-LEEL
Golan (H)	go-LAHN
Hilazon (H)	hee-lah-ZONE
Karmiel (H)	car-mee-EL
Majd al-Krum (A)	MAjd ahl-KROOM
Misgav (H)	mees-GAHV
Negev (H)	NEH-gev
Sasa (H)	SAH-SAH
Sha'ab (A)	SHAH-AHB
Shorashim (H)	shore-ah-SHEEM

Words and Expressions

Bageli (H)	BAY-geh-leh
Bar Mitzvah (H)	bar MITZ-vah
Bat Mitzvah (H)	baht MITZ-vah
Eid al-Fitr (A)	EED ahl-FEE-ter
Fajr (A)	FAH-jer
Falafel (A/H)	fah-LAH-fell
Hamas (A)	chah-MAHS
Hezbollah (A)	hez-BAHL-LLAH
Hummus (A/H)	CHOO-moose
Hijab (A)	hee-JAHB
Iftar (A)	IF-tar
Intifada (A)	IN-tih-FAH-dah
Jilbab (A)	jeel-BAHB
Kibbeh (A)	KIB-beh
Kibbutz (H)	key-BOOTZ (<i>as in "look"</i>)
Kirkas (H)	keer-KAHS

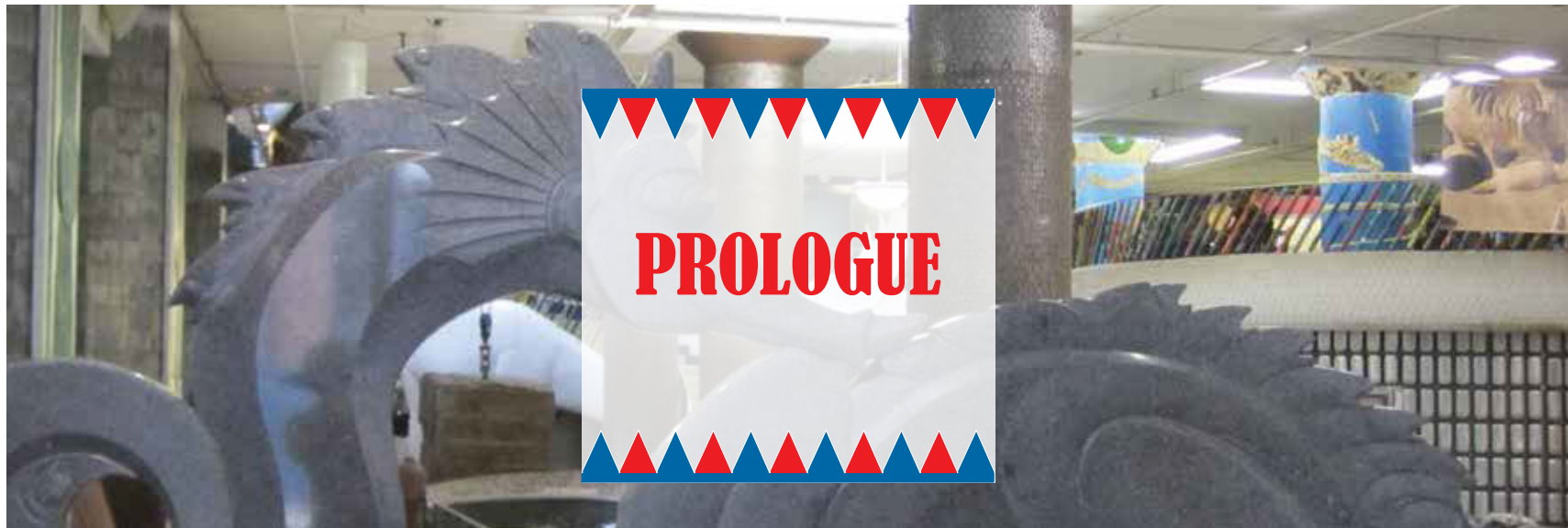




ARABIC AND HEBREW PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Ma'assalama (A)	mah-AH AHS-sah-lah-MAH
Matkot (H)	maht-KOTE
Mazel tov (H)	mah-ZAHL tove
Mishma'at (H)	meesh-MAH-aht
Nakba (A)	NAHK-bah
Pita (H)	PEE-tah
Qur'an (A)	kur-AHN
Ramadan (A)	RAH-MAH-DAHN
Rosh Hashanah (H)	ROSHE hah-shah-NAH
Sababa (A/H)	sah-BAH-bah
Salaam (A)	sah-LAHM
Serk (A)	SERK
Shalom (H)	shah-LOME
Shemini Atzeret (H)	sh-ME-nee ah-TSAIR-et
Shishlik (A/H)	shee-SHLEEK
Shuk (H)	SHOOK (<i>as in "loose"</i>)
Simchat Torah (H)	seem-CHAHT toe-RAH
Sovivich (H)	so-vee-VEECH
Sukkot (H)	soo-KOTE
Tallit (H)	tah-LEET
Tefillin (H)	t-fee-LEEN
Tisha B'av (H)	teesh-AH beh-AHV
Torah (H)	toe-RAH
Tzedakah (H)	tsuh-DAH-kah
Tzehu le Shalom (H)	tsoo luh shah-LOME
Yom Ha'atzmaut (H)	yome ha-AHTZ-mah-OOT
Yom Kippur (H)	yome KEE-poor
Za'atar (A/H)	ZAH-ah-tar
Zhug (A/H)	z'chug





PROLOGUE

*“[Circus is] a
compulsion to like
to do crazy things, to
push the boundaries
of what is humanly
possible.”*

—Laura Ricci

A decorative dragon stands guard at City Museum

Circus is a big tent.
That doesn't mean that circuses always perform in tents. But wherever circuses perform, they encompass worlds:

- ~ a world of tricks, from pratfalls to flying
- ~ a world of sounds, from lilting to blaring
- ~ a world of costumes, from dainty to glitzy
- ~ a world of feelings, from fun to fear and back again
- ~ a world of troupers, from around the globe
- ~ a world so thoroughly entrancing that circus creates its own universe.

The Universe of Circus

What comes to mind when you think of a circus? Clowns? Wire-walkers, elephants, human cannonballs, cotton candy? All of these—and more—can fit. Circuses have changed over time, and they display different styles in different places. Performers generally agree on these five common elements:

- Acrobatics, including contortion, mini-trampoline, Pyramid, and tumbling (solo movements like flipping and springing)
- Aerials, including tightwire, lyra, silks, and flying and static trapeze
- Equilibristics (balancing), including rolling globe, rolla bolla, and unicycle





- Object manipulation, including juggling, diabolo, poi, and staff twirling
- Clowning

Some pros also include animal acts.

The World of Youth Circus

Watch Out for Flying Kids spotlights a little-known corner of this universe: youth social circus.

As the first word of the name suggests, “youth circus” refers to programs in which the performers are children. The nine performers featured in this book are teenagers.

The word “social” refers to the mission of bringing together young people who would not ordinarily meet—or, if they did, might fear or oppose each other. The two organizations portrayed in this book—the St. Louis Arches and the Galilee Circus—bring together young people from vastly different backgrounds and cultures through training in circus arts. The goal of both groups is to replace fear with respect and opposition with trust, changing the world one acrobat, contortionist, and flyer at a time.

Why wouldn’t these kids meet if it weren’t for circus? Why might they even fear or mistrust one another? The three white and two black troupers who are Arches live in different neighborhoods and go to different schools in St. Louis, Missouri, a city that is segregated by race and income level. The two Arabs and two Jews who perform with the Galilee Circus in northern Israel live in towns segregated by religion, ethnicity, language, and history. They represent groups that have been violently at odds with each other for hundreds of years.

Watch Out for Flying Kids shows what happens when all of them get together. That is, it demonstrates how they learn to juggle their responsibilities, fly above the fray, balance schoolwork and circus work, unicycle circles around people who doubt them, tumble gracefully through life—even when injured—and walk the tightrope of politics and friendships.





CHAPTER ONE

THE ST. LOUIS ARCHES

*“You have to
embrace dropping.
Dropping is a
good thing. It’s a
sign you’re trying
something hard and
something new.”*

—Richard Kennison

Of the more than 700 kids who took classes at Circus Harmony in 2012, only ten were skilled enough to be designated a St. Louis Arch.

The five Arches at the center of this book had worked hard to get there. They astounded audiences, and sometimes themselves, with their feats. Through years of practice, failure, and even injuries, they had developed the necessary flexibility, strength, courage, and trust to become part of a unified team.

But each of these individuals came from different circumstances. Some were black, some white. Some came from the upper-class, others from the middle-class or the under-class. Some lived within stable families while others grew up in splintered families. Each Arch grew up in a different neighborhood of metropolitan, midwestern St. Louis, Missouri, and attended different kinds of schools. As a result, each one found circus in a different way.

Second Most Dangerous

Named for King Louis IX of France, St. Louis was founded in 1764 as a fur-trading post. A century later, the frontier town was so prominent that some people suggested making it the capital of the United States.

The St. Louis skyline





With the growth of railroads in the nineteenth century, St. Louis became known as the Gateway to the West. In 1904, the city, which was then the fourth largest in America, hosted both the Olympic Games and the largest-ever World's Fair up to that date.

With the exception of the often-successful St. Louis Cardinals baseball team, the early twentieth century may have been the high point for St. Louis. Beginning in the 1920s, wealthy people fled to the suburbs as black people from the Deep South moved to the city looking for jobs. In 1876, the city of St. Louis had voted to separate itself from St. Louis County, so these suburbs consisted of separate municipalities or counties, each with its own mostly white schools and superior services.

Segregation laws and customs prevented blacks from moving to the suburbs, and much of the inner city began to turn into slums. Many businesses that remained in the downtown area, such as stores and restaurants, refused to serve black customers. When the mayor ordered a public park desegregated in 1949, whites retaliated by beating blacks, and riots ensued.

Urban renewal projects in the 1960s built highways across St. Louis, slashing apart neighborhoods and forcing even more residents, who were generally black and poor, into public housing and tenements. The remaining blacks who could afford to escaped to nearby suburbs on the north side of the city, and whites moved even farther out.

In some of the increasingly black neighborhoods, the political leadership remained in the control of white people. Black residents felt that city councils, school boards, and police discriminated against them.

Various school desegregation programs, begun in 1980, allowed students to transfer between the city of St. Louis and outlying county schools. These programs reduced racial separation somewhat. But the plans have not been stable, and urban schools remained underfunded and under-performing.

The 1965 construction of the St. Louis Arch, the tallest man-made monument in the world, and other rehab projects have





Kellin Quinn Hentoff-Killian, age 6

brought tourists and trade back into town. Still, in 2013, the city, with a population of about 318,000 and falling, ranked as the second most dangerous in the country; it had the third-highest murder rate. The greater metropolitan area, with a population approaching three million, is on average far safer.

Racial, educational, economic, and other distinctions between the inner city and the suburbs have persisted. These distinctions define the very different backgrounds of the Arches.

Kellin Quinn Hentoff-Killian

As soon as his mother disappeared into her office, Kellin toddled over to the case of juggling equipment and pulled himself onto his tiptoes. The two-year-old reached up and grabbed a ball in one hand, then another in his other hand. He placed them carefully on the floor and did the same with another pair of balls. Then he pretended to juggle.

Kellin knew what to do—sort of—because he'd been watching older kids juggle nearly every day since he was an infant. He had been with his mother, Jessica Hentoff, when she negotiated with Bob Cassilly, the eccentric owner and designer of City Museum, for space to house Circus Harmony, where she was the artistic and executive director. Kellin had watched his older siblings learn to walk on globes. Born into and growing up within the circus, he could ride a unicycle before he could handle a bike.

After Circus Harmony moved into its new home at City Museum, Kellin and his family seemed to spend more time there than at home. "We were at the circus a lot, when they were little," Jessica said. "It was really not good how much we were at the circus."

Kellin could explore City Museum 24/7 because he didn't go to school, at least, not in a traditional school building. Jessica homeschooled him and his siblings, Elliana and Keaton. Kellin did his math and English worksheets in an unusual place. "We had a circus train," he said, "with three big circus train cages. There were giant stuffed animals, like tigers. I would squeeze through the bars and do my work there."



THE ST. LOUIS ARCHES

Mostly, though, Kellin juggled. “I concentrate on my juggling,” he said. “I’m not good at concentrating on school.”

One day, when he was six, Kellin announced, “I want to be in the one o’clock show tomorrow.”

“Doing what?” his mother asked.

“I made an act.”

And he had. While Jessica was working, Kellin had planned and choreographed a fifteen-minute juggling routine, with a beginning, middle, and end. Many novice jugglers’ presentations are very simple and don’t last longer than a minute. Even veteran performers’ acts conclude within about ten minutes. But Kellin’s routine progressed from handling ordinary items, like balls, to more challenging objects, like clubs, and from basic cascade patterns to more complex maneuvers.

The next day, he played the one o’clock show. He even “styled”—stood up straight, flung his arms out, and grinned—after every trick. The audience was transfixed.

From then on, Kellin performed regularly with the Arches. His mother paid him, just as she did the older troupers, for appearing in Circus Harmony’s multiple weekly shows at the Museum. Like the veterans, he even passed the bucket after each show to collect donations to help cover their salaries, coaching, and costumes.

Jessica usually doesn’t teach juggling to children younger than eleven because, in her experience, their eye-hand coordination isn’t good enough. A complicated maneuver like juggling would be too frustrating for most young kids. But when Kellin was seven or eight years old, Richard Kennison joined the Circus Harmony team as a juggling coach. He started giving Kellin private lessons. “Kellin did learn early,” Richard agreed.

However, Kellin had to work hard like everybody else. “He had to pick up balls and try and fail. Try again and fail. Failure is part of the process to success,” Richard explained. “You have to embrace dropping. Dropping is a good thing. It’s a sign you’re trying something hard and something new.”

City Museum



City Museum’s 600,000-square foot building began life as the International Shoe Company. A local artist named Bob Cassilly bought the empty structure in 1983 and opened it to the amazed public in 1997. Its ever-changing zany features include a ten-story slide (converted from the chutes through which workers sent shoes to different levels in the factory); a school bus, the front half of which hangs, on hydraulic suspension, off the side of the building and bounces up and down when visitors jump inside it; Daniel Boone’s log cabin; The World Aquarium, which is also an animal rehabilitation center and contains a crawl-through shark tank; a thirty-foot high Ferris wheel—and Circus Harmony.





Iking Bateman, age 12

Kellin kept trying, all right.

“We would go to the grocery store,” Elliana recalled, “and he would juggle the fruits and vegetables! If he thinks he can juggle it, it’s going to happen.”

Kellin advanced from handling three balls to four. Within months, even four balls weren’t enough to satisfy him.

He demanded knives—and not just the cheap, dull blades Circus Harmony already owned, but attractive, expensive, sharp knives. His mother refused to buy them, so Kellin entered a local juggling competition. Even though many of the other contestants were professionals, Kellin won. He used his \$300 prize to buy his own professional juggling knives—real metal rather than plastic.

Sidney Akeem (“Iking”) Bateman

“Could we leave?” eleven-year-old Iking pleaded with his mentor, Diane. The circus was only halfway over and he was ready to go.

Iking was the sixth of eight children, all of whom were being raised in a two-bedroom, shingle bungalow by their grandmother. His mother had died in prison when he was three, and he’d never met his father.

Iking had been identified as “high risk” by his school. An organization called Discovering Options, which finds mentors for kids likely to drop out of school, arranged for him to meet once a week with Diane Rankin, a white woman who happened to be a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. The arrangement was only supposed to last for three months. At first, Iking was too shy to talk with Diane; she suspected he wanted to “fire” her. But ten months later, she was still taking him to McDonald’s, reading to him, and searching for other activities he might enjoy.

Iking told Diane that a couple of his brothers had taught him how to tumble on the mattresses spread across the floor of their bedroom. She had already taken him to a gym where he had demonstrated midair backward somersaults. In July 2003, she took him to see Circus Flora, a professional troupe. It featured an elephant, clowns, jugglers, and wire walkers—and the St. Louis



THE ST. LOUIS ARCHES

Arches, who dazzled the audience with their power tumbling.

Diane had arranged for Iking to meet Jessica at intermission. She knew that Circus Harmony welcomed talented tumblers, especially those who could benefit both from the family atmosphere and from the structure that the program offered—elements that were missing from Iking's life.

Iking and Diane watched the first half of the show. But at intermission he asked to leave. He didn't even want to wait around to see the Arches or meet Jessica.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay?" Diane asked.

"Yes," he insisted. "It's not interesting to me."

I can't pick him up and carry him backstage, she reasoned. So, they left.

Throughout the fall of 2003, Diane took Iking on weekend excursions—but she had to pick him up and drop him off at his grandmother's during daylight. "My neighborhood is really bad," Iking said. "It's not a neighborhood you'd go outside and sit outside on your front porch and, like, relax and chill. You'd be afraid of guns shooting in the next street, high-speed chases, stolen cars flying down the street.... But, I have to live in it."

Nearly a third of the people who lived in his neighborhood were poor. Almost half had dropped out before graduating from high school. And, like most of St. Louis's inner-city areas north of Delmar Avenue, the informal but real black-white dividing line, it was 97 percent black.

Discovering Options was right in pegging Iking as at-risk. His teachers didn't know how to help or handle him. Sometimes he clowned around, ignoring them. At other times, he got into fistfights. Unlike other people, Diane didn't scream at him. "Okay, Iking, let's think about this," she'd say. "What happens when you fight? Could you do something else, instead?"

She tried to talk with his teacher or principal but they rarely had time to discuss Iking. His home life was too disorganized for anyone to transfer him to another school. The staff told Diane that Iking needed a black male authority figure in his life.



Diane Rankin





Do You Want to Be an Arch?

Required skills for the Arches have increased over time.

Typical examples include the following:

- Do five pull-ups, five chin-ups, and fifteen push-ups
- Hold hand stand for twenty seconds
- Do three back handsprings
- Hold a flyer as a base and elevate to a shoulder stand as a flyer
- Tuck and pike from a mini-tramp
- Hula hoop on a rolling globe; step through a hoop on a rolla bolla
- Pop and catch diabolos; juggle and pass three clubs
- Hang by ankles from a trapeze; climb and descend aerial web
- Unicycle
- Choreograph a four-minute act



"He has me," she responded.

Meanwhile, she kept urging him to visit Circus Harmony. Finally, in January 2004, he consented. "I saw some tumbling mats in the circus area," Iking said, "and I ran on them into the ring and started tumbling."

But Donald Hughes stopped him. "You can't be tumbling on the mats," the young black coach told Iking. "Insurance reasons. You have to be one of the students of the school."

"So, right there," Iking said, "I got brochures and papers and signed up for a class."

That's also when he acquired his nickname. At school, everyone called him Sidney. He wanted to use a different name for circus, so he offered Akeem, his middle name. But even that didn't seem exotic enough. So when the office manager asked him how he spelled it, he blurted out, "I-K-I-N-G," and it stuck.

Iking had never had formal training in tumbling; he was what Donald called a street tumbler. He was strong and quick, but his legs cocked at odd angles when he did his tricks, and his toes weren't pointed. Donald worked with Iking on straightening his legs, pointing his toes, and using momentum rather than sheer muscle power to propel himself.

"At the beginning, he was stubborn because he felt that he knew a lot," Donald said. "He thought it [his skill] was better than what it was." Fortunately, Iking was willing to learn. "He had a great attitude. He always wanted to get better."

Iking improved quickly, and at the end of the first ten-week session of classes Jessica asked him if he'd like to join the advanced group, the Arches. (In those days, the entrance requirements were informal, so it wasn't unusual for a young performer who didn't yet juggle or unicycle to join.) He didn't know what the Arches were expected to do but agreed he'd give it a try.

"I was shy. I wasn't quite sure about it," Iking said. "But they accepted me really quickly." Not only did the kids welcome him, but the activities were fun too. "I was, like, I could probably get used to this." As an Arch, he could be in Circus Flora that year.



And then he broke his foot.

"We was carrying the mini-trampoline out of the ring after practice, and I tripped over a speed bump. I fell, and the crash pad fell on my foot. It was bad."

Iking appeared in the official Arches-at-Flora photograph as a member of the troupe, but he couldn't perform.

Meghan Clark

Meghan strolled through Laumeier Sculpture Park with her parents and younger brother. The Clarks noticed a crowd gathering nearby, so they joined it and sat down on the grass.

Even though the Clarks had moved to the outer suburbs of St. Louis six months earlier, Meghan still didn't feel settled. She didn't have many friends in fifth grade and she didn't know what sports she wanted to play.

Things were different in St. Louis. "We had maybe three black people in my entire school in Green Bay," she said. "On my first day of school in St. Louis, there were like ten or twelve [black] students in my classroom alone."

She noted other differences. In Wisconsin, she recalled, "you're either Catholic or you're Lutheran, and many people know you along those lines." But in St. Louis, "every religion has a temple or a shrine or a church on this one street that's in the district for our school. We get a lot of diverse students."

Because her elementary school in Green Bay had been pretty homogeneous, almost everyone hung out together. In her new middle school, however, she noticed that kids formed groups based on color or religion or income. "I thought it was weird.... There was a lot of separation between the blacks and the whites and the Muslims.... People separated along class lines as well."

Sitting in the park, Meghan watched a group of kids who were tumbling and performing acrobatics. "It was kids my age," she said, "doing something cool." As she observed these preteens,



*Meghan Clark, age 12, on the right,
Donesha Buhr on the left*





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she recognized some of the skills she had learned in dance and gymnastics, but she knew there was a big difference.

"I knew how to do some of it and definitely thought I could learn. At the same time, I was in awe," she said. These kids were so polished, Meghan noticed. "They were able to get applause from people other than people related to them!"

The performers turned out to be the Arches. It was a diverse group of kids, like those at her school, but they weren't segregating themselves. They were clambering over each other and supporting one another. Even before the performance ended, Meghan told her parents she wanted to take circus classes.

"It seemed attainable but I'd have to work for it, which I like," she said.

She started in the fall of 2006, when she entered seventh grade. "I showed up to my first class, and I had to be in the beginning class," Meghan said. "I was a little annoyed about that because there were much younger kids than I was." She was already proficient in many of the skills the beginners were just learning. "Forward and backward rolls, round-offs, front and back walkovers—that's what I'd just do on the playground for fun."

Meghan's father asked Jessica if she could be moved up to the intermediate class. Jessica watched Meghan go through her paces and said, "Hey, she is kind of flexible." She promoted her after the first semester. Even though Meghan felt intimidated because the other students were more advanced, she liked being with kids her own age.

"I like looking up to people," she said, "rather than feeling superior."

Shaina Hughes

Shaina made her circus debut when she was only eight months old. She stood in her father's hand while he strolled, atop a large rubber globe, into Circus Harmony's ring. She doesn't remember the trick, of course, but she's seen the pictures of her dad, Donald Hughes, balancing her "like a feather."





THE ST. LOUIS ARCHES

By the time Shaina was four years old, her father began formally coaching her. “I started tumbling,” Shaina said, “learning how to do cartwheels and the basics, like forward rolls and plate-spinning.... I’m a fast learner, and I learned how to do everything.”

Because Shaina was so adept, Jessica made her an Arch and started paying her to perform in Circus Harmony’s regular shows. During her dad’s act, Shaina waited, as quietly as an excitable five-year-old could, until the music changed. Then she dashed into the ring, where her dad swept her up and planted her feet on his shoulders. Shaina balanced and styled like a pro.

The following year, she and her father worked on a trick they called The Thinker, after the bronze statue by Auguste Rodin. She posed with her chin in her hand, while balanced in a one-legged squat on her father’s shoulder and wrist.

“It was really hard at first,” Shaina said, “and really scary... because he wasn’t holding on, and I didn’t have anything to hold onto.”

Once she stopped swaying and found her balance, she felt proud. But her father wasn’t satisfied. He wanted them to make the trick even riskier by performing it while he tried to keep his balance on a rolling globe.

“I didn’t want to do it at first,” Shaina said. “I was afraid I was going to fall. But...my dad reassured me that I wasn’t going to fall and that [if I did] someone would catch me.”

While her dad shifted his feet back and forth on the globe so that he didn’t roll right off, Shaina cautiously maneuvered herself into position.

“After the first time I did it,” she said, “it was okay. I wasn’t scared after that.”

For her finale, Shaina did a forward roll from her father’s shoulder onto the globe on which he stood. “The audience thought it was amazing!”

At that age, she loved everything about circus—from her costume to the audience’s clapping. As she grew older, though,



Donald Hughes was one of Jessica’s first students. He believed that circus had kept him off the streets and out of jail—maybe even saved his life. “Most of the times my [old] friends were hanging out on the corner, I was at somebody’s gym practicing.... Most of [them] are either in jail or dead.... I’m still alive.”

Shaina was born when Donald was nineteen. Fearing that his daughter might face the same dangers and temptations he had, he enrolled her in circus classes as soon as possible.



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*Shaina Hughes, age 5,
and Elliana Hentoff-Killian, age 7*



she didn't always think it was amazing to live with her coach. Her parents split up when she was about three, and she divided her time among her mom's, her dad's, and her grandmother's places. She and her mother moved frequently. By the time Shaina was eleven years old, she'd lived in about ten different homes and attended multiple elementary schools. She spent every summer



with her dad because he could ferry her to circus, where he still worked. But at times, she wasn't sure she wanted to go anymore.

"It was pretty hard because, even when we were not at circus, when we were at home, I'd still have to practice, and I'd still get critiqued. He would tell me what I need to work on and what I'm doing really well. It was like having a full-time coach. At first, I didn't take it so well because I felt like my dad was always targeting me." Several times she became so frustrated that she nearly quit circus.

Around the time they were practicing The Thinker, Shaina told her dad she wanted to get her back handspring. "I was working really hard every day. I just couldn't get it," she said. "I was really upset."

"Keep practicing," her father insisted. After all, mastering her back handspring had been her idea, not his. And, once she set a goal, he was going to make sure she met it.

After trying and failing time after time, she finally yelled, "I never will be able to get this. I don't ever want to do this again!"

"Keep trying."

"I don't want to do it. I give up."

"You will get it," he assured her.

At that point she was sure that she would not. Furthermore, she didn't care. Then, one day when her father was out of town, her mood shifted.

"Something told me that day to trust my instincts and go for it. When I did it that one more time, I got my back handspring!"

When her father returned to town, she was excited to show him that she could do it on her own. Initially, she was nervous because he was watching her, and she missed.

This time she assured him, "No, wait. I can get this." And she did—from then on. Back handsprings were exhilarating. "When I go fast, it looks like arches going across the ground.... It's like colors flying past.... When you're in a room full of colors, it's very beautiful."





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All of the practices paid off. By the time she was seven, she could tumble, juggle three balls, and perform a fast-spinning act on the lyra, a circular trapeze.

The Arches became a way of life and a family. Donavon and Lil Donald, her two younger half-brothers, also performed in the circus. They sometimes put on shows together for her friends' birthday parties.

Just before her eleventh birthday, everything changed. Shaina was spending the night at Jessica's house. She and other kids stayed there often enough that Jessica kept a rack that held twenty-five toothbrushes on her bathroom wall, each space labeled with a child's name.

The next morning, Shaina's mother picked her up. "We're moving to a town in Illinois called Rock Island," she announced. She didn't give an explanation, but Shaina worked out that her mother's newest boyfriend lived there.

"I didn't want to go," Shaina said. But she had no alternative. She couldn't stay with her father. He didn't have custody. Jessica invited her to move in but Shaina's mother refused. Within days, Shaina, her mother, and her younger half-sister moved to Illinois.

Alexandra Gabliani

Alex stared at the floor lamp in the living room while her adoptive mother talked on the telephone. Recently arrived in St. Louis from an orphanage in Russia, Alex had discovered lots of spaces to explore in her new home and neighborhood. Directly across the street lay Oak Knoll Park, a rambling, wooded expanse with picnic tables, trails, a pond, and a playground.

But at that moment, two-year-old Alex was bored, waiting for her mother to get off the phone. The long pole on the lamp intrigued her. Surely, she figured, she could climb up and reach whatever was at the top. So she gave it a try.

Her mother "freaked out," Alex said, and exclaimed, "We need to do something with you!"





Not long after that, her parents enrolled Alex in gymnastics class. Initially she learned basic skills, like forward and backward rolls and walkovers, as well as hanging and swinging from a bar. Beginning when she was six, Alex attended a circus day camp during the summer. The program was run by Alexandre ("Sacha") Pavlata, who had taught the first group of Arches with Jessica. Alex learned partner acrobatics, trampoline, and some juggling.

"Lots of kids from my school went," she said. "It was just one of those popular things that every kid wants to be a part of."

Between gymnastics during the school year and circus camp over the summer, Alex grew strong and flexible. By the time she was eight years old, she could handle front and back handsprings and was learning to do back tucks. In fact, her tumbling and acrobatic skills were strong enough that she began to participate in competitions. But she found them unappealing.

"I didn't like working so many hours just to compete with my friends," Alex said. "It took the fun out of the sport.... Suddenly, we weren't very friendly with each other because we were trying to do better than each other." Also, the routines were structured and mandated. She preferred more open-ended, freewheeling activities.

The camp moved to a large gymnasium, where Sacha set up aerial equipment including flying trapeze, cradle, and cloud swing. Because Alex had developed more flexibility and strength in gymnastics than other kids her age, he worked with her on skills that the others weren't ready for yet.

"I've always liked powerful acts that require constant movement," Alex said. "So, I liked swinging." She'd wrap her legs around the ropes of the cloud swing, pump with her knees, lean forward—and let go.

Best of all was flying trapeze. "I was too small to reach the bar on my own," she recalled. "So the person who held me literally picked me up and helped me grab the bar."

Fortunately, her hands were already callused from her many hours doing gymnastics. The trapeze bar, a length of thick metal



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*The St. Louis Arches at
Circus Harmony in 2005
From left: Junior Williams,
Matt Viverito, Iking, Elliana,
Casey Tkaz, Lemond Carmickle, Alex
Gabliani, Shaina, Keaton Hentoff-
Killian, Kellin, Lil Donald Hughes*

wrapped in tape, can scrape and blister children's hands. But Alex didn't notice the pain.

"I reached out my hands while she held onto my waist. She would give me a push, let go, and I would swing... Flying felt very free... It's a feeling you can't get from anything else—the freedom and the power that you feel while you're swinging. It feels like you're pushing everything else away. Nothing matters other than the swing [and] the bar."

Alex adored the lofty freedom of aerials so much that she became impatient with the strict ground rules of gymnastics. When Sacha announced that he planned to move to Boston to open a circus school, he asked Alex's parents if she could move with him.





Alex realized that wasn't possible. Still, she told Sacha, "I want to run away and join the circus."

"I'll help you," he told her. He took Alex across town to meet his friend Jessica at Circus Harmony.

"It was chaos," Alex recalled gleefully. Tumbling mats and circus props were scattered around, and lots of kids were bouncing and socializing. Jessica auditioned Alex and immediately named her an Arch. Alex wasn't a bit sorry that she'd quit gymnastics. Now she could do circus year-round!

Many of her new teammates didn't live in the western suburbs, as she did. Sometimes when her nanny picked her up after practice, she gave kids rides and dropped them off at their homes downtown. "My friends' houses were so much smaller and so much more broken down than mine," Alex noticed. A few of these kids called her "the rich girl," which upset and confused her.

Just months later, Alex participated in her first circus show—so different from gymnastics competitions. Even though she found the costumes ugly, the show was thrilling. The Arches performed before a St. Louis Rams football game. She walked on a globe, did a tumbling routine, and handed Keaton his juggling props. The audience loved the youthful circus troupers. And Alex loved the crowd, the freedom, and the lack of competition.

Jessica Hentoff and the St. Louis Arches

It's not unusual for college students to set off a dormitory fire alarm as a prank. But Jessica set hers off by accident—while practicing fire-eating.

As a bookish child from New York City, Jessica didn't climb a tree until she was ten years old. In college she needed to find a class that fit her schedule and chose one called Circus. She learned to juggle, clown, tumble, unicycle, and walk on stilts. Enthralled by pushing her body to its limits, she became known at school as "that circus girl."





*Jessica Hentoff holds
her son Keaton, age 1*

Her parents were amused by her hobby until she tried fire-eating. Jessica and her father, Nat Hentoff—a prominent writer, political activist, and music critic—had a face-off. He “thunderously disapproved” of her pyrotechnics. Instead of giving up fire-eating, she added aerials to her repertoire, which he did not consider an improvement. But after her teacher Warren Bacon taught her how to fly, Jessica never looked down—or back.

Desperate to expand her skills, she wrote to fifty circuses, searching for a summer job after her freshman year. “I’ll do anything,” she pleaded. “I’ll water the elephants. I’ll clean up after them. Anything at all.”

The only one that responded was a Methodist youth circus named The Circus Kingdom. Because she was Jewish, Jessica wondered if they’d made a mistake. But the director, Reverend David Harris, told her, “This circus is about people from all backgrounds.”

The circus’s performers—mostly high school and college students—put on shows in retirement homes, prisons, and youth facilities. That summer, Jessica learned that circus wasn’t only about juggling and tumbling. It was really about “the brotherhood of man and how we can all get along.”

She told Warren, “This is what I want to do with my life.” He didn’t think Jessica was a particularly gifted circus performer, but he knew she was willing to work hard. He agreed to help.

When Jessica graduated from college, she heard about a new kind of circus that was starting up in New York City. Big Apple Circus promised to be different from traditional, three-ring American circuses. It was nonprofit and all the action was staged in one ring. Sensing that “there is magic in that one ring,” she called Warren.

“You’ve got to come to New York,” she told him. “This is the renaissance of American circus.”

Warren and Jessica became partners and did aerials with Big Apple for two years, while Jessica also performed acrobatics with



another partner. After that, she and Warren went out on the road with the Coronas Aerial Thrill Circus.

Things were going well...until the day Jessica fell.

They were doing an aerials perch act in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1979. Two clowns were spotting them to make sure they didn't land on their heads or backs if they fell. The clowns, however, got distracted at the exact moment that Jessica was supposed to catch the trapeze rope with her foot. But she didn't.

She fell thirty feet, dislocating her shoulder and gashing her leg. At that moment, Jessica realized that circus was truly dangerous. She debated quitting. During the several months that it took her to heal, she repeatedly asked herself, "Do you really want to do this?" She concluded that she did.

Jessica and her father quarreled bitterly over her decision.

"Living in New York is much more dangerous," she argued.

"The odds are alarmingly different when you spend your working hours where only birds are naturally at home," he retorted. Jessica's father was so infuriated that he refused to speak to her.

When she was about eleven years old, she had told him, "I want my name to be known." Now, she determined, "If I was going to go back, I was going to do something exceptional." She intended to concoct an act that no other performer had ever accomplished.

To develop her new routine, she knew she needed to attend professional circus school. At the Circus Arts Center in New Jersey, Jessica studied with two of the world's top coaches from the famously demanding Moscow Circus School. There, she met Kathie Hoyer, who eventually became her new aerials partner. Together they developed a double-trapeze trick called Heel-to-Heel that no one had ever done before or has ever repeated.

In 1985, the two women moved to St. Louis. Kathie had grown up there, and the town was centrally located for their forays around the country. Circus Flora hired them and, not long afterward, established its headquarters in St. Louis.

The following year, Nat watched his daughter perform for the first time. In an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, he wrote that





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Mission Of Circus Harmony

"Circus Harmony teaches the art of life through circus education. We work to build character and expand community for youth of all ages, cultures, abilities and backgrounds. Through teaching and performance of circus arts, we help people defy gravity, soar with confidence, and leap over social barriers, all at the same time."

until then, he had "refused to attend any of Jessica's performances for two reasons—protest and fear." As she climbed a rope to near the top of Flora's tent, he grew fearful for her.

"But once the act began," he continued, "I became so involved in the unfolding of its choreography that I forgot to be afraid."

Jessica felt that her father's article was, finally, "his ultimate form of acceptance." After five years, they could talk to one another again.

Three years later, David Balding—the founder, artistic director, and producer of Circus Flora—asked Jessica to start a youth program. She recalled something that Warren had told her when she thanked him for introducing her to circus in college: "Pass it on."

It was time to do that.

Jessica created the St. Louis Arches, named for the city's soaring steel monument on the Mississippi River and for her students' graceful back bends. Six or seven years later, Bob agreed to provide space at City Museum, rent-free. In exchange, Jessica promised to present circus shows to the museum's visitors, cost-free.

After a decade, Flora withdrew its financial support for the youth program; David decided to focus on performing rather than teaching children. But Jessica knew she couldn't quit. After all, second-generation students like Shaina needed circus too. So in 2001, she established Circus Harmony as an independent, nonprofit social circus for children, with the St. Louis Arches as the new company's performance troupe.

