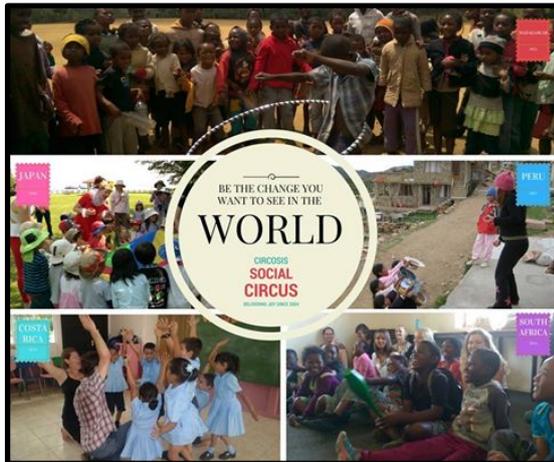


# MAKING CHANGE THROUGH SOCIAL CIRCUS

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I am currently in Alice Springs, where I have just spent a couple of months collaborating with Circosis Circus, a small circus company from the heart of Australia. I was drawn to Circosis because of their two great strengths: their celebrated performances and their global social circus program well known for its excellence.



Last month I had the opportunity to participate in one of their renowned social circus projects. This took place on an extremely remote indigenous community named Kaltukatjara, a small town of approx. 300 people on the edge of the Gibson Desert. It was on this project that I began to gain more insight and respect for this branch of social work, to see firsthand how this approach works in practice and also the many tangible benefits for the community where the program took place.

Circosis Social Circus is a social intervention program centred on circus pedagogy. It targets at-risk youth living in marginalised personal and social situations around the world. Their purpose is to support personal and social development; to improve self-esteem and promote empowerment; to build on existing social capital and to promote positive and healthy ways of living. Specifically, the programs of Circosis are specialised in using circus activities which enable young people to feel empowered through fun and healthy activity while in a supportive environment.

When we arrive at Kaltukatjara, many of the kids remember Circosis from previous visits and are already excited. Some have even travelled several hundred kilometres on dusty desert tracks to participate. Once the community leaders know we have safely arrived, Circosis begin their program by getting the young people involved in unpacking the unicycles from the vehicle and reassembling them. Together, during this activity, Circosis and the young people discuss their ideas and aims during the visit, outlining a plan and outcome for the week. In this manner, the young people are already taking on a sense of ownership in how the program will unfold. Chalk drawings which demonstrate the plan, as well as team and trust building games, precede the individual circus skills that will be taught.

Their program goes on to facilitate the learning of juggling, unicycle, stilts, acrobatics, hula hoops, many other skills, all aimed to stimulate self-confidence and co-operation. It is important to note that the participants can choose the activities and the instruments on their own, based on their personal skills and interests.

In many of these communities this program is ongoing and creates continuity by building relationships not only with the youth but also with families, community, local youth workers and schools. On this occasion, Circosis took their time visiting the houses of the young people, talking with families and including them in the program. They also facilitate other activities such as cultural trips, barbeques and social gatherings which include the parents and family members and opens up further discussion around matters facing young people. The aims and tools of the program are shared with the local youth workers and school teachers so that activities and benefits may be incorporated into their overall program after Circosis have left. With

some communities this relationship has been ongoing for over a decade.

I have seen firsthand that Circosis' approach works precisely because the framework of their program is based on the fundamental objectives of social work. It seeks to facilitate the welfare of communities, individuals, families and groups. It aims to promote social change, development, and empowerment. Social circus becomes a place where difference can turn into enrichment; everyone can find their own role without the necessity of competing with each other. The strength of circus disciplines is that they can be transferred across linguistic and cultural barriers. Circosis' well-developed program shows us this by having been successfully applied in diverse cultural contexts around the globe.

Sarah Cook, Co-founder and Director of Circosis describes their program as also having other objectives: advocating and connecting young people with support services; diversion of at risk behaviour and role modelling healthy active past-times; re-entry into school and school attendance; personal development and two way learning; facilitating cultural exchanges with the sharing of skills; stories and information between local youth workers, teachers and families.



"The broader overview of our program also aims to further build resilience so that young people are better equipped to deal with adversity. We do this by adapting the tools of circus pedagogy and broadening the overall approach using the experiential learning model. We address key themes such as: leadership, mental health, physical health and wellbeing, healthy relationships and language,

literacy and numeracy, implementing these into the program wherever possible. Support networks are key and building relationships with families and community is how we approach this."

After practising with one of the trainers, I see two 13 year old boys taking turns helping each other mount an extremely tall 5ft Unicycle, physically helping each other but also verbally encouraging each other in their first language, Pitjantjatjara, and then going on to succeed in this extraordinary feat. The joy is profound. What is even more thrilling to see is that these boys then go on to teach some of the others who have been watching and learning.



At a group level, these disciplines do achieve high team involvement and cooperation, while at an individual level they build creativity, obtain skills through goal oriented tasks and in turn develop skills so that young people can teach others; facilitating the development of mentoring and leadership, an important step in ensuring the ongoing benefits of the program.

The project culminates with a show in front of the community. In this way, the young people can share what they have learned. It is a platform which gives them a voice and a place where teamwork and individual skills shine. It is a formal unification of the skills gained throughout the project; a framing of the outcomes put into a context where the community can come together in shared celebration. Joy and laughter strengthens relationships within the community while showcasing the potential and talent of young people. The whole process is documented and made into film which is then screened at community events, another tool in validating the successful outcomes of the project.

I think it is very important to implement fun and engaging programs focused on youth, creating relationships with families, enhancing wellbeing and building the foundation for social justice.

I would like to see more programs which model the Circosis Social Circus program with their caring and sensitive approach, implemented in many more communities around the world.

*“Social circus is a powerful catalyst for creating social change because it helps marginalized individuals assume their place within a community and enrich that community with their talents.”*

- Cirque Du Monde



Valentina is a 26 year old Italian who is currently travelling Australia on a working holiday visa. She graduated with a Master's degree in Sciences of Social Work at the University of Padua, Italy in 2015. Her foray into the circus arts began with aerial silks (circus disciplines) five years ago. She is a member of Le Rivoltelle Aerial Dance Company in Venice. She is also a member of a voluntary association Addis Beteseb Onlus, where in 2014 she spent two months in Africa working with children on humanitarian projects. She was drawn to the world of social circus in Italy during her studies as this field represents the ideal union between her studies and her passions.



Circosis Social Circus is comprised of Sarah, Andrew and Inyika Cook. This joyful and talented travelling circus family have been providing leading edge social circus around the world since 2004. With specialist training across the circus disciplines, physical theatre and performance, and an exceptional understanding of social and cultural awareness, Circosis have facilitated their programs with great skill and compassion in Costa Rica, South Africa, Madagascar and Japan, as well as across hundreds of remote indigenous communities in Australia.

The youngest member and also the Ringmaster of the troupe, two year old Inyika Cook, has performed for hundreds of kids in five different countries and builds an instant rapport with children, families and communities, promoting a harmonious cultural exchange wherever she goes.

Circosis value their relationships and feel very honoured to learn from, share knowledge and visit places belonging to some of the oldest continuing cultures on the planet. They acknowledge the traditional owners past and present of the lands they visit.

For more information visit  
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