

TEACHING THE WHOLE PERSON

AN INTERVIEW WITH CIRCUS INSTRUCTOR KASUMI KATO

Kasumi Kato is a circus artist and instructor in Chicago who works with children from diverse backgrounds to help instill a love of circus and to help them build their life skills alongside their circus skills. Kasumi grew up in The Flying Low Family Circus, a social circus in Atlanta, Georgia. At age fifteen, she began professional training and by eighteen she was performing with troupes across the southeast. Her new home in Chicago teaching at CircEsteem has re-invigorated her love of social circus and her work with kids of varying abilities has incited a new academic interest in circus as a means of therapy.

HOW DID YOU BECOME A CIRCUS ARTIST?

I was part of a family circus in Atlanta run by Carrie Heller (the social circus guru). I began at age five but was exposed to circus since infancy. Our circus was very community and family oriented. We worked with a stunt team that was composed of kids from a homeless shelter from across town. We performed a lot for groups who otherwise might never have seen a circus.

WHAT MAKES YOU WANT TO REACH KIDS WITH CIRCUS?

I find that circus is incredibly accessible to everyone. At the AYCO EdCon last year, a speaker described circus as one big open door that lets everyone in and inside there are several smaller doors to places you can specialize in. In other words, bunny hops lead to somersaults, which lead to front handsprings. Also, circus is novel to most people, especially kids. Trying to spin a plate or juggle scarves is simple, but it also challenges expectations of what you can do—building up the habit of self-challenge. I find that refreshing, because in most sports there is an inclination to believe you have or don't have a natural ability, but with circus it takes all kinds of sizes, skill levels, and ages. We need

long, thin jesters and big, old clowns. It's a very forgiving and humbling experience for all, and it teaches resilience.

HOW DO YOU GET KIDS INVOLVED IN THE PROGRAM?

My students tend to find circus as an alternative to something. They may have been too tall to be a gymnast or the wrong dimensions for a ballerina. Most of them haven't had the luxury to try gymnastics, but they get the same opportunity to learn to flip around at circus. Some come from a team sports background, but they find the sport too competitive. Circus is a welcoming place where they can be just as active. Plus it is unique, interesting and cool.

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE SOCIAL CIRCUS?

Circus began on the fringe of society. It was a place for freaks and outliers. Over time, circus has become normalized in fun and engaging ways. Now it is accessible and everywhere. Social circus is a way to use a circus setting to help us understand the human condition. From everyday logistical problems like carting kids from one end of the city to the other, to important life skill development, social circus' solutions evolve to meet the populations served, no matter

how singular the challenge. I act as a big brother to the kids. As an intermediary, I talk to their families, principals, counselors, refugee counselors, and teachers. Sometimes their parents don't speak much English, so we will set up an interpreter to come. We have mediated children going through mental health issues and helped prevent kids from getting expelled. We advocate for the child. At one point, after mediating a week-long dispute between two sisters about who ought to carry the house key each day, one of my students told me, "Sumi, you're a good solution-er." I politely agreed.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SOCIAL CIRCUS AND THE CIRCUS WE ALL KNOW AND LOVE?

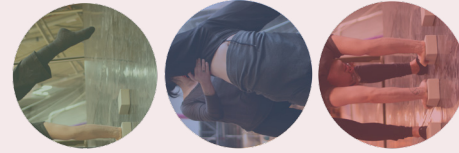
The line is blurred because all circus is social—but our program is needs-based. We have one of the few afterschool programs that is free of cost in our neighborhood. Another difference between social circus and traditional circus is that social circuses tend to establish as non-profits, while traditional circuses generally license as for-profit businesses. That being said, most larger youth circus schools have a component to them that operates as social circus.

In traditional circus classes there is not necessarily the care for the whole person. If someone is having a bad day, or can't attend because of a problem at home, they might sit out or miss class. But we try to tailor the program to the needs of the individuals involved. We offer an after-school tutoring program (because our students needed an alternative to summer school) and a teen performance troupe for high school-aged students to allow them the privilege of acting and performing as a representative of the CircEsteem organization. We recently started a teen mentorship program to help teens who have been showing signs of depression. We have a preteen group that feeds into our teen performance troupe. It gives preteens experience as assistants and instructors because we saw that some preteens needed more ownership in their actions in order to keep engaged. We have a teen job program that offers cash pay or scholarship money for college. One student last year earned \$3,000 working as an instructor, and CircEsteem matched that amount.

WHAT DOES SOCIAL CIRCUS DO FOR YOUR STUDENTS? HOW DO YOU TEACH IT?

Social circus instructors do not





just teach tricks to students. They teach lessons to whole, evolving people. They teach skills in metaphor: juggling is not merely throwing balls in the air, it is how we cope with juggling school, home life, and social life. Tightwire is not merely balancing on a thin metal wire; it also demonstrates how we can remain balanced and navigate a sometimes impersonal public school system. Falling off the unicycle 10,000 times builds resilience and acts like therapy for dealing with adversity and failure in the real world. Social circus instructors teach the same circus tricks as circus school instructors do, but we try to plant a seed in the minds of our students about mutual respect rooted in the human experience.

For example, we emphasize social gains. We have children co-teaching, acting as role models, getting job experience, and enjoying a diverse community with mixed ages and races. These are things our students may not experience in their home or school lives. In our program, I have 40 youths between ages 8 and 18. The tutors are mostly college kids between ages 18 and 22. So a 21-year-old tutor may be teaching a 16-year-old student physics, and that same 16-year-old may be teaching the 21-year-old how to juggle. That crossover alleviates a lot of the vulnerability of learning

something new. The 16-year-old gains the confidence to teach an older person something, and the 21-year-old has to be humble enough to fall off of a rola bola over and over again in front of a student.

Since the program is an hour and a half of circus and a hour and a half of homework—and it takes a strong arm to spot a unicycle—the tutors are encouraged to participate with circus training in the context of helping the students and building connections and confidence. Everyone on my staff can juggle at this point. It's great for kids to see adults try and fail and keep on trying. That is how we teach resilience.

HOW DOES SOCIAL CIRCUS REACH THE WHOLE PERSON? CAN JUGGLING REALLY LEAD TO BETTER GRADES AND STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS?

In working with at-risk youth, I wear so many different hats: playmate, counselor, tutor, and bus driver to name a few. I ensure that my kids are achieving their personal, academic, and creative goals.

All of our programs are developed in response to the needs of the youth served. For example, upon realizing that academically challenged kids needed more homework help, the program HomeWork & CircusWork was formed. When our teens could not attend programming because of the

need to begin breadwinning, we created our Working Teen program. Within our programs there is a lot of flexibility to address each individual's needs. I sometimes make individual contracts with kids to address behavioral issues. I ask kids what needs to change about their behavior in order for them to be in a better place. Then we come up with steps to do that and a system of natural rewards and consequences. Sometimes it is hard to come up with a natural reward, so we'll agree that if the student brings a grade up from a D to a C they can have 10 extra minutes on mini-trampoline at practice or maybe a set of their own juggling balls.

CAN YOU GIVE US AN EXAMPLE OF HOW SOCIAL CIRCUS HAS HELPED SOME OF YOUR STUDENTS?

One 8-year-old came to us with behavioural issues, and he fell in love with juggling. I asked him one day how circus helped him. He said circus made him from someone who didn't pay attention to someone with more focus.

We have a daily circle where we check-in about the day. Since many of my students aren't native English speakers, I introduced a 'word of the day' to help with vocabulary, and I often pick a word with some social value, like 'confidence.' On Fridays, the kids get to chose the word of the day.

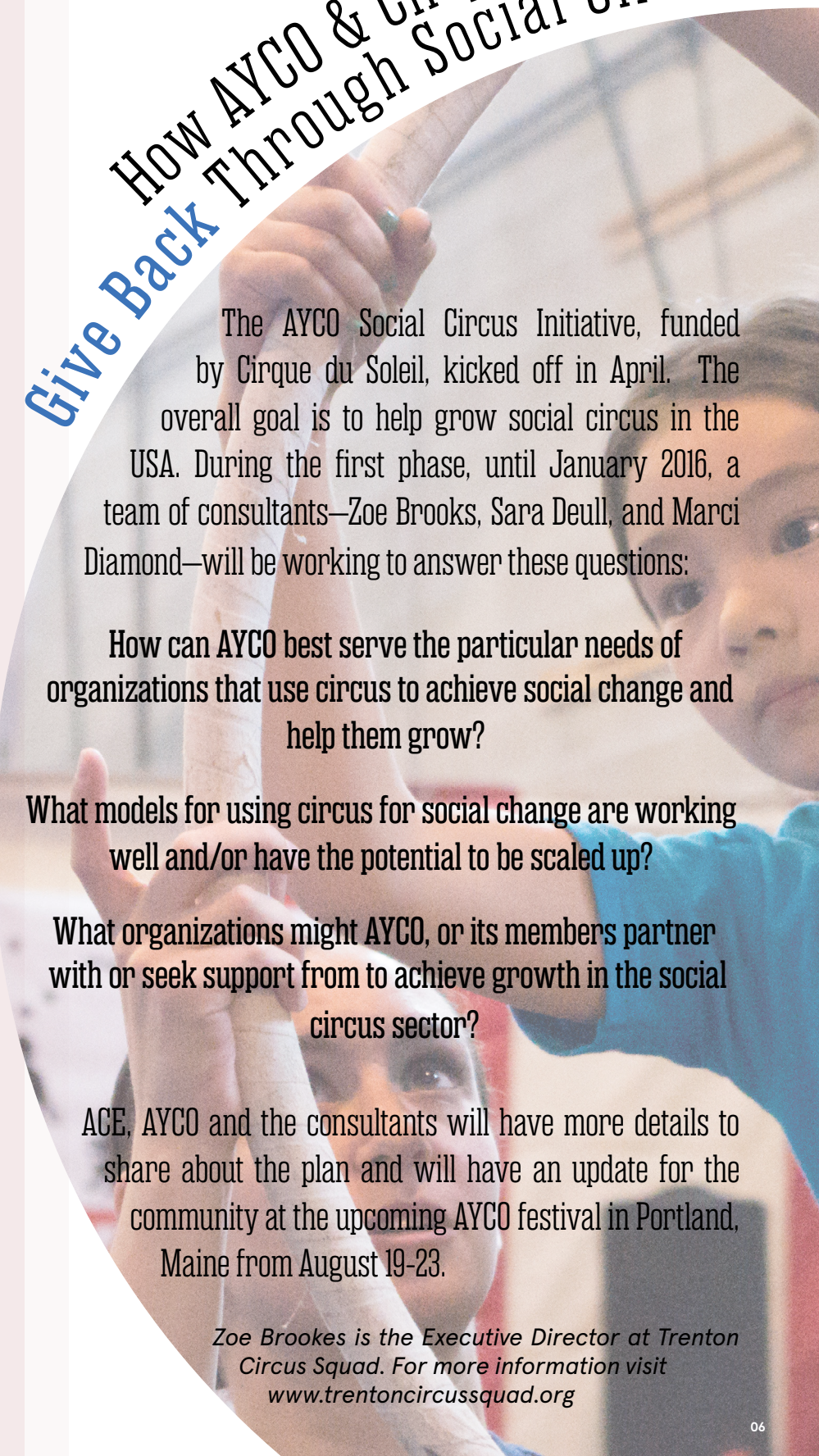
A 7-year-old recently chose the word 'empathy.' I think they are learning something about themselves.

WHAT DOES WORKING WITH AT-RISK KIDS IN A SOCIAL CIRCUS SETTING TEACH YOU?

In my youth, when participating in our family circus, I just thought this was something that every family does. Doesn't everybody do doubles trapeze with their mom? Doesn't everybody perform tumbling and partner acrobatics with the homeless shelter kids from across town? As a kid, I took for granted how profoundly these experiences affected me. As a young pupil, I didn't fully understand circus's impact on my life and personality until long after graduation from our youth circus program when I began work as a social circus instructor. Now, thoughts of those days bring tears to my eyes as I continually work toward more meaningful, healthy relationships with my family and as I council dozens of at-risk youth each week. After a decade of discovery in social circus, I still continue to unravel greater meaning in my association to circus, as an artist and an instructor. It is the most life-affirming work I have come across, and it's so much fun in the process!

For more information about CircEsteem's programs, visit them online at CircEsteem.org

BY ZOE BROOKES
How AYCO & Cirque Du Soleil Give Back Through Social Circus



The AYCO Social Circus Initiative, funded by Cirque du Soleil, kicked off in April. The overall goal is to help grow social circus in the USA. During the first phase, until January 2016, a team of consultants—Zoe Brooks, Sara Deull, and Marci Diamond—will be working to answer these questions:

How can AYCO best serve the particular needs of organizations that use circus to achieve social change and help them grow?

What models for using circus for social change are working well and/or have the potential to be scaled up?

What organizations might AYCO, or its members partner with or seek support from to achieve growth in the social circus sector?

ACE, AYCO and the consultants will have more details to share about the plan and will have an update for the community at the upcoming AYCO festival in Portland, Maine from August 19-23.

Zoe Brookes is the Executive Director at Trenton Circus Squad. For more information visit www.trentoncircussquad.org