

Living

The Circus Project: Portland street kids learn acrobatics and how to cope

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practice their skills.

Taylor Coghill (from left), Charlotte Ives, executive director Jenn Cohen and Maggie Oesting

BY JENNIFER WILLIS

It turns out that flying through the air with the greatest of ease is one way to help Portland street kids get back on their feet.

"I was textbook homeless," says Charlotte Ives, 21, of Rochester, N.Y. She says she left home at 17 because of family issues and even lived in the woods for several months before moving to Portland. "I had a job, and I was living in my car. I was working at a coffee shop, and then it closed. And then it was, 'What am I going to do?'"

Ives found

[the Circus Project.](#)

a nonprofit that offers circus and performing arts training to homeless and at-risk youths while focusing on personal development, work-study and relationship building - in short, helping kids get back on track.

This year's participants -- Ives, Maggie Oesting, Taylor Coghill and Joesai Carr -- have been learning acrobatics, aerial arts, clowning and similar skills.

They are working to craft a unique performance of "The Odyssey," based as much on their own journeys from homelessness to finding their place in the world as on Homer's heroic tale.

"I initially wanted to do something about bringing out the divinity of these kids," says Circus Project executive director Jenn Cohen about the program's annual show.

Cohen's first impulse was to explore Greek gods and goddesses, then the students expressed an interest in creating a show around their experiences of moving from homelessness into the circus and beyond.

"And I thought, well, that's 'The Odyssey' right there," she says.

Cohen, a professional circus artist with a master's degree in process work psychology, founded the Circus Project in 2008 to combine her interests in circus as an art form and working with at-risk youths. The Dec. 2 performance, a benefit for the Circus Project, will be held in the Portland Art Museum's Kridel Ballroom.

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Jenn Cohen, left, who founded the Circus Project in 2008, works with one of this year's participants, Joesai Carr.

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Outside of their intensive training sessions, participants complete 50 hours of work-study assignments each month, covering everything from cleaning the equipment to soliciting items to be auctioned at the benefit.

"The kids work harder when they're paying for it ... and (they) desperately need work experience," Cohen says. "The Circus Project isn't just about creating an act. It's about giving them the tools to go out in the world and get a full-time job and stay in a relationship."

"We've all been homeless at one point or another," says Carr, 22, who was living on the streets six months ago. He is now in transitional housing, has a job and says the Circus Project changed his life.

"I've never felt better about myself and my ability to be a person," he says, warming up on the mats in the Circus Project practice space. "Better eating, better stretching, more exercising. ... If there's a way that I can take care of my body better, I do it."

The Circus Project Training Company costs \$62,272 annually for up to six participants. This includes twice-monthly group therapy, gym memberships and other services in addition to training with Cohen, Stefan Furst, Mizu Desierto, Sue Morrison and other professionals.

The Circus Project

Benefit show and dinner

When: 7 p.m. Friday, Dec. 2

Where: Kridel Ballroom, Portland Art Museum

Tickets: \$125 for individuals; \$1,125 for a table of 10 (sales close Nov. 18).

Volunteers: If you'd like to see the show but can't afford tickets, Jenn Cohen (503-764-9174) is looking for volunteers.

Contact information

The Circus Project

"Getting youth off the ground"

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Portland 97296

Online:

thecircusproject.org

Email:

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Other offerings

Drop-in classes: The Circus Project offers weekly drop-in classes for homeless and at-risk youths.

Public classes: The Circus Project offers classes, workshops and team-building sessions to the general public. Proceeds from these classes support programming for homeless and at-risk youths.

Performance troupe: Made up of Circus Project graduates and national and international performers, the troupe presents theatrical circus performances and

international performers, the troupe presents theatrical circus performances and commissioned pieces. Proceeds support outreach efforts for Portland's youths in need.

"I feel honored to teach such gifted kids," says Furst, a former competitive gymnast and coach from Austria who teaches acrobatics. "If you never try, you never know how far you can go. We do push the kids, but that's how they find out more about themselves."

Oesting, 21, says an early challenge was transitioning out of having nothing to do all day except wait for meals or a place to sleep.

"Now being in a place where not only do I have Circus Project going on, I have a job and just all these other amazing opportunities, I feel like I'm able to give back what I'm getting," she says. "And also just learning to speak up and take up my space. I finally yelled and used my voice, and it felt really good!"

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At 18, Coghill calls herself the baby of the training company and says the Circus Project has forced her to become more responsible.

"I feel like now I represent something that's bigger than myself," she says, noting that she behaves differently when she's wearing her Circus Project hoodie. "What this program is doing is huge. It's huge for circus, and it's huge for street kids. ... Not only does this give me a stepping stone for a performance arts career, it's also given me the tools to know how to be responsible and how to follow through with things. (Because) I have a lot of big dreams."

Each performer has his or her own story about how they wound up in Portland, in the Circus Project, so we're letting them tell their stories, in their own words.

JOESAI CARR, 22

I'm from Point South, South Carolina. I came to Portland and I was like, I'm going to get an apartment! And I didn't have enough money and I went, heh, I can live. I did, and I learned a lot. I went traveling up and down the California coast. It's been a long, crazy trip.

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I have a really bad thing with being bored easily, and in circus there is never something that I can't just say, well, I've never seen this before, I'm going to try to do it. I learned how to spin a fire staff. I've learned how to juggle. I've learned how to do handstands. I've learned so many extremely varied things.

This is better shape than I was in the Army. (I) was not nearly as flexible or as strong as I am now. I'm not just doing a whole bunch of push-ups. I'm throwing people up in the air and flipping myself up in the air, and landing gracefully.

TAYLOR COGHILL, 18

I'm from Portland. From when I was 14 until last January, I was a drug dealer pretty much. It was pot and acid, following the Grateful Dead. But it became this cycle of, I have to sell this sheet of acid to get the next gallon of gas to go to the next show to sell the next sheet of acid. I wasn't doing anything, and I thought I was changing the world.

I could have been arrested anywhere in the country, but I got stuck here, and so I kind of was forced to come back to everything that I was running from in the first place.

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Once I found out about Circus Project and auditioned, I got off the streets. I got into transitional housing, and now I'm looking at apartments.

I love this program because it did something really special for me. It gave me motivation to actually do something with myself. I'm realizing I can experience so much of myself with like a clean head and a clean body, being clean and sober.

What's really wonderful about this is, even if you don't ever touch circus after this experience, it's good for you. There are so many aspects that can be incorporated into day to day life.



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Charlotte Ives (left), 21, formerly of Rochester, New York, works with Jenn Cohen.

CHARLOTTE IVES, 21

I'm from Rochester, New York.

There's kind of this mind-set that you have when you're dealing with homelessness. It's kind of like borderline depression, this mind-set of, there really is no future. Looking back on it, it's kind of scary. I didn't think I would make it to 21.

Now I can look into the future and imagine myself doing these great and wonderful things. I've never imagined that for myself at all. If I fail, that's OK because I've done that before. But if I do really good, then it's like millions of more opportunities will open up, and that's scary in itself and exciting.

(Circus has) done a lot to motivate me (and) give me something to look forward to.

There's a lot of time spent on the streets when you're just kind of like whatever's going

there's a lot of time spent on the streets when you're just kind of like, whatever's going to happen happens. But here, you have to get better now. You have to push yourself and keep pushing yourself. I think that's a good lesson for everyone to learn, and maybe homeless kids just have a really hard time learning it.

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MAGGIE OESTING, 21

I'm from Petaluma, California. I was an exchange student in England when I was 16. (My) grand plan was to move back to England, but it didn't quite work out.

I started drinking when I was 15. Growing up, I thought all that alcohol abuse was normal. (At one point) I had psoriasis all over my body from drinking. I'd definitely done some damage to my body and my brain. I just didn't feel alive.

I've gotten through a lot of struggle and a lot of changes within myself. ... What I was seeking through all of that was just like family and community. I've been sober for 10 months now.

I've found through this training that butoh and clown just appeal so strongly to me. ... We went out on the street and did a performance, and we were all smeared in clay and dressed in white. And it was amazing! I want to do more of that.

I'm hoping that next summer I could maybe be a counselor somewhere, doing circus particularly. But I don't know. There's a lot of options out there.

This is the strongest I've ever been and the healthiest I've ever been. Just seeing every day how your strength and flexibility change is so exciting. I just want to see how far that can take me.

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Jennifer Willis

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