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What Works

Cirque du Soleil Thinks Globally **Elaborate partnership network supports** **circus workshops for at-risk youth**

By Brenda Branswell

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what works

Strategies, Approaches, Developments



A Cirque du Monde trainee practicing his craft on the streets of Amsterdam.

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Cirque du Soleil Thinks Globally

Elaborate partnership network supports circus workshops for at-risk youth *by Brenda Branswell*

The Cirque du Soleil is known for its dazzling and innovative circus spectacles, which have entertained nearly 33 million people in 130 cities worldwide. Less well known, but no less innovative, is the Cirque's social action program, which includes a global network of circus workshops for marginalized and disenfranchised youth.

The Montreal-based company, which earns nearly \$700 million annually, devotes 1 percent of ticket sale revenue – or about \$6.2 million – to outreach programs for at-risk kids,

many of whom struggle with poverty, drug addiction, or homelessness.

Paul Laporte, the Cirque's director of social affairs and international cooperation, says troubled youth are drawn to the element of risk inherent in circus, and they benefit from the family atmosphere. "The circus is a bit of a microcosm of the street," he says.

Indeed, when CEO Guy Laliberte – a former fire-eater, stilt-walker, and musician – founded Cirque du Soleil in 1984,

PHOTOGRAPH BY LYNE CHARLEBOIS



the first artists were street entertainers. It was in those beginnings that Laliberte found inspiration for the Cirque's social action programming. "We come from the street, we have to give back to the street," says Laporte.

The workshop program, launched in 1995, is called Cirque du Monde, French for "Circus of the World." It is the largest of Cirque du Soleil's eight social action programs, with an annual budget of about \$3.1 million. Workshop instructors aim to build self-esteem by teaching circus skills such as juggling and trapeze.

There are currently workshops running in 34 communities worldwide, including a dozen in developing nations such as Senegal, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, and Mongolia, and three in "indigenous" nations (Aboriginal Australia, and Inuit and Atikamekw nations in Quebec).

And the key to sustaining the workshops, organizers say, is an elaborate network consisting of about 50 local partnerships.

There are several questions the Cirque seeks to answer before launching a circus workshop overseas. Is there a good cultural fit? Is there a need for the program? Can Cirque find a reliable and capable partner? Is the partner a good match, both in terms of its mission and the Cirque's goals? And finally, can the partnership be sustained over the long haul?

In 1998, for example, Cirque programmers in Montreal were interested in starting a workshop for troubled youth in Mongolia. The country, which had opened up in 1990 after seven decades of Communist rule came crumbling down, was a good cultural fit because it had a strong, preexisting connection to circus arts.

"In Mongolia, they have a lot of contortionists," said Esther Gagne, Laporte's assistant. "They have many circus artists who trained in Russian circus schools when Mongolia was under Soviet influence."

There was also a pressing need. "After all of the political and social change, there was an increase in poverty that directly affected youth," Gagne said. "There were many at-

risk youth in the country."

But Cirque programmers know they can't simply show up in a developing nation, put up a shingle, and hope at-risk youth will come. They need local partners.

In some cases, the Cirque taps into a local nonprofit through an international relief organization with expertise in a given region. That's what happened in 1998, when Oxfam Canada suggested Cirque start a workshop in South Africa for children dealing with the apartheid fallout. Oxfam, a nonprofit international development organization founded in 1963, suggested Cirque partner with Kwazulu-Natal Programme for Survivors of Violence, a nonprofit, non-governmental organization based in Durban. The first Durban workshops were offered in 1999.

When it came to Mongolia, however, the Cirque didn't have an international relief organization to rely upon for a reference. Instead, the Cirque approached a Montreal-based physician active in international adoption, who referred them to the Mongolian Child Rights Center, a nonprofit in Ulaanbaatar.

With a reference in hand, the Cirque conducts internal research, reading through the partners' brochures and annual reports. "We try to check out their credibility," Gagne said, "and their approach in terms of working with young people."

After initial phone or e-mail contacts, Laporte conducts a site visit. In 1999, for example, he visited both Ulaanbaatar and Durban to meet potential partners, check out existing facilities, and get a feel for the people on the ground. In both cases, Gagne said, "There was a discussion about how circus workshops could be integrated into their overall work and

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Photograph by Eric St.-Pierre

strategy.

"When we start the negotiation, we let them know we expect them to help us identify young people to work in the circus program, to recruit them, and to motivate them to come.

"The [partner] must facilitate the logistical aspects – find-

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ing a venue, finding a place for our coach to stay, securing additional funding if necessary,” Gagne added.

Partners also must facilitate public workshops or demonstrations so that the at-risk youth can periodically show off their talents for friends and family.

Once satisfied that a local partner is up to the task, Cirque sends a Montreal-trained instructor. These instructors are often local street performers, or solo circus artists, who attend seminars in preparation for working with troubled youth. Once they arrive on site, they collaborate with local youth workers, hired by the partners, who help funnel at-risk youth into the circus classes.

In general, Cirque trainers spend one month on site the first time, followed by two-month visits thereafter. They

attempt to integrate local coaches wherever possible. In Durban, the Cirque utilizes instructors from a circus school in nearby Cape Town. “After three years, we generally reach the point where local trainers can take over,” Gagne said. “Over time, the projects become more autonomous.”

The Cirque tries to follow up with site visits at least once a year to ensure programs are running smoothly. About 15 youths have completed circus workshops in Durban, and 40 have been trained in Ulaanbaatar, with more programming planned in both cities.

“We don’t believe in short-term activities,” Laporte says. “If we didn’t have partners to do what we’re doing, it would be impossible.” □