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'Every day is a circus day'

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In northern Israel, the Galilee Circus was begun three years ago by the Galilee Foundation for Value Education. The 10-to-15-year-old Arab and Israeli performers -- having learned acrobatics, juggling and clowning -- have successfully played at Arab and Israeli community centers, villages and schools -- and the Israeli and Arab circus artists have themselves become a working community.

The long-term goal of the Galilee Foundation is for the circus to become "the basis for a multicultural center serving the Galilee providing varied opportunities for common cultural experiences and cooperation between Jewish and Arab Israelis." Why choose a circus as a bridge between two cultures? Because, as the Galilee Foundation explains convincingly, "Circus is a noncompetitive community based on mutual trust and support; and since it is based on nonverbal communication, it transcends language barriers."

Similarly, American jazz has become an international language. World-class American jazz guitarist Jim Hall tells me, "I play in many countries with musicians whose spoken language I can't speak, but we communicate with deep satisfaction and respect." Since 2001 in St. Louis, the nonprofit Circus Day Foundation, now internationally renowned, has been based on the same values as the Galilee Circus. Its artistic and executive director, Jessica Hentoff, my daughter, is an experienced performer, along with her three children, who are in the circus. The troupe is widely multicultural, and the Circus Day Foundation teaches circus skills in St. Louis schools and other locations.

In tune with the Galilee Circus, Jessica says her mission is to "work to build character and expand community for youth of all ages, cultures, abilities and backgrounds. Through the teaching performance of circus acts, we help people defy gravity, soar with confidence and leap over social barriers all at the same time." As Jessica has often told me, circus skills become life skills: "perseverance, focus and teamwork that create trust, responsibility and cooperation." The Circus Day Foundation has twice performed with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, as well as at the Spoleto Festival in South Carolina and many other venues. But what promises to be its most exciting experience will take place this summer from July 8 to July 22. With the Galilee Circus, they will share circus skills and create a group show, which will tour Israel.

Representing the Circus Day Foundation of St. Louis in this soaring adventure in circus harmony will be the St. Louis Arches, assembled and directed by Jessica for many years. Appearing in Galilee, these 10- to 17-year-old acrobats, jugglers, trapeze artists, barebackriders and tightrope walkers will teach and learn from the Arab and Israeli

youngsters in the Galilee Circus.

As the Galilee Foundation for Value Education and the Circus Day Foundation say: "The similar philosophies of our foundations make them natural partners. While the members of the Galilee Circus and the St. Louis Arches are having the most amazing times of their lives as they share their skills with each other and across Israel, they will be showing the world that it really doesn't matter where you are from or what your background is. It is who YOU are and what YOU do that makes a difference.

"This cross-cultural, country connecting circus will demonstrate what can happen when people of different nationalities and backgrounds build something together. They are only children but they have a lot to teach the rest of the world."

One of Jessica's favorite stories about how lifelong circus education can be concerns Elizabeth "Bunny" Herring, who, more than 60 years ago, at the age of 18, ran away to join Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus to be a showgirl. Last November, she celebrated her 80th birthday at a Circus Day Foundation show by performing high up in the air on the aerial lyre a circular trapeze. It was a breathtaking event that attracted nationwide attention.

When Jessica was a young performer on the road, she'd end her letters to me with a triumphant, "Every day is a circus day!" This summer, many Arab and Israeli youngsters will have circus days to remember for a long time to come, as will the Arab, Israeli and American members of the circus family newly come together in Galilee and on the road in Israel.

To become a sponsor for the trip or to find out more about the Circus Day Foundation's "teaching the art of life through circus education," visit their Web site at www.circusday.org.