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Evaluation of "Circolina's Leap" A Community Circus Programme

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Executive Summary

This report presents the evaluation findings of a 12 week 'all ages, all abilities' community circus programme in Auckland. In this programme, between March and May 2012, Auckland Community Circus held separate weekly circus classes with four groups:

- 1) Children and young people aged from four to sixteen years
- 2) Adults with intellectual, physical and learning disabilities
- 3) Deaf children, young people and adults
- 4) Adults with experience of mental illness.

These groups took what they learnt in the weekly classes to three joint rehearsals, to create two public performances of a show called 'Circolina's Leap' at the Pumphouse Theatre in Takapuna, on 18 and 19 May 2012.

A three minute YouTube clip of the programme and performances can be viewed at www.communitycircus.co.nz.

Programme aims

The aims of the programme were to enrich the individuals involved (over 50 in total), connect people of all ages and abilities, build a new creative community, change public perceptions of disability and create wider community benefits.

Evaluation methods

Evaluation methods were self assessment by participants at the first rehearsal; face to face interviews with participants; audience feedback straight after both performances; a discussion forum after the first performance; and debriefs the week after the performances, with participants and the project team.

Evaluation aims

The aims of this evaluation are to tell the story of the programme, identify the perceived benefits for those involved, capture the expected and unexpected outcomes and highlight lessons for future similar projects.

Evaluation findings

Reported benefits for participants were significant and included having fun, learning new skills, building confidence, making friends, a sense of pride and achievement, learning about others and doing something positive for the community. Ninety one percent of the 35 participants asked said that they would like to do more circus, because it is fun, cool, exciting, a way to make new friends, be challenged and work with others. Holding the performances at a professional theatre, with good quality production also heightened the experience for participants.

Deaf participants gave the highest ratings overall in terms of what they learnt from the project. Supporting Deaf participation and communication among all participants through interpreters, and having two narrators onstage for Deaf participants and audience members was considered valuable.

Eighty eight of the 271 audience members provided written feedback on the shows (32%). Audience feedback was extremely positive. When asked to rate their response to the show, 83% gave it the highest rating of 5 (It was great!) and 17% the next highest rating of 4. Key themes were that the shows were high quality, inclusive and integrated; that the performers were clearly enjoying the experience; that the performances were engaging and entertaining and that audience members were moved and inspired by the shows.

Seventy nine percent of audience respondents stated that the show had some to major impact on their view of disability, with 27% reporting a major impact. Key reasons given were the high quality of the performances and production and the obvious enjoyment, confidence, sense of achievement, pride and teamwork of the performers. Some audience members noted that the performances show what people can achieve when well supported.

Key goals of Circolina's Leap to create an all ages, all abilities experience and a new creative community have been achieved. The focus on ability rather than disability was considered empowering. Many participants enjoyed working with people from diverse backgrounds and abilities, calling it humbling, inspiring, challenging and rewarding.

Other than affecting attitudes to disability and providing members of the public with an opportunity to witness a unique performance, wider community benefits relate to the connections made through this project. They include connections between the key organisations involved, the Pumphouse Theatre and these organisations (and especially Auckland Community Circus), and relationships forged among the participants and their families, caregivers and supporters.

From Circolina's Leap, Auckland Community Circus has experienced increased participation in their weekly circus classes after the performances, via new disability service providers bringing people to their classes and more children coming to the Grey Lynn children's class. Auckland Community Circus is also setting up a new class at the Kelston Deaf School in Term Three.

Lessons for future projects

Lessons for future projects from this experience are as follows.

- There is a positive relationship between the quality of production achieved (venue, props, set design, costumes etc) and the benefits experienced by those involved.
- Consider the timeframe for such a programme carefully. A shorter timeframe can create more chaos, risk and anxiety, but can also provide focus and bring out the best in everyone as people work together to achieve a challenging task. A longer

timeframe can produce a more polished result, but a shorter commitment may be more appealing to participants.

- Having the structure of a story line holding the performance together was considered valuable, rather than just showcasing different circus skills.
- Seek to develop in-kind, mutually beneficial partnerships in projects like these, for example with venue providers and others who can assist with props, costumes and design.
- Programmes such as this require strong creative skills, facilitation, project management and people skills. This programme was fortunate to have an experienced project team which had these skills and gelled as a team. If one of these elements is weak the results may be compromised.
- Ideally funders would attend performances so they can see the results of their investment. Community circus is best experienced first-hand, rather than described in words. Related to this, ensure that the process and performances are captured through film and photographs.

Circus is a powerful medium to achieve a wide range of social and creative outcomes. While the public performances were the pinnacle of this programme, its deeper impact involves what it provided for participants, the connections it has forged and the way it has altered perceptions of ability and disability. Support is currently being sought for "Circolina's Community Leap", which aims to engage new audiences and opportunities for performances, using DVD footage, photography and small performances at a range of community organisations and events. A new charitable trust called "Circability" has also been formed to grow this endeavour.

Overall, this evaluation demonstrates a clear desire from the public and participants of Circolina's Leap for more of these kinds of initiatives.



Introduction

This report presents the evaluation findings of an Auckland based community circus programme called Circolina's Leap. This programme was run by Thomas Hinz and Frances Kelliher, trading as Auckland Community Circus.

The evaluation of Circolina's Leap was funded by the Lotteries Community Sector Research Fund, as part of a wider project on developing community circus in New Zealand. This research project is a partnership involving Circus Kumarani in Dargaville and researchers' Rachael Trotman and Alex Woodley, plus Thomas Hinz and Frances Kelliher from Auckland Community Circus¹.

Background

Circolina's Leap is an 'all ages all abilities' community circus programme, involving a diverse range of people learning circus skills over three months from March to May 2012. The skills learnt by these groups separately in their weekly classes were developed into a combined circus show involving all of the groups performing together. The show was called Circolina's Leap, and was presented in two public performances on 18 and 19 May 2012 (see Appendix One for the flyer advertising the performances).

The following groups and individuals were involved in Circolina's Leap.

- Adults with intellectual, physical and learning disabilities, mainly from Hohepa Auckland²
- Adults with experience of mental illness, from Toi Ora Live Art Trust³
- Deaf children, young people and adults via the Auckland Deaf Society⁴, Deaf Arts Network⁵ and Kelston Deaf Education Centre⁶
- Children aged from four to sixteen years, from community circus classes based in Grey Lynn
- Adult artists and skilled circus enthusiasts
- The central performer in the 'Circolina's Leap' circus show has physical disabilities and operates from a wheelchair.

¹ See the Circus Kumarani www.circuskumarani.co.nz and Auckland Community Circus www.communitycircus.co.nz websites for research findings to date. These relate to a literature review on community circus (April 2012) and an online survey of the New Zealand community circus sector (August 2011).

² See <http://www.hohepa.com>. Hohepa's aim is to support people with intellectual disabilities to develop to their fullest potential, following the principles and teachings of Rudolf Steiner.

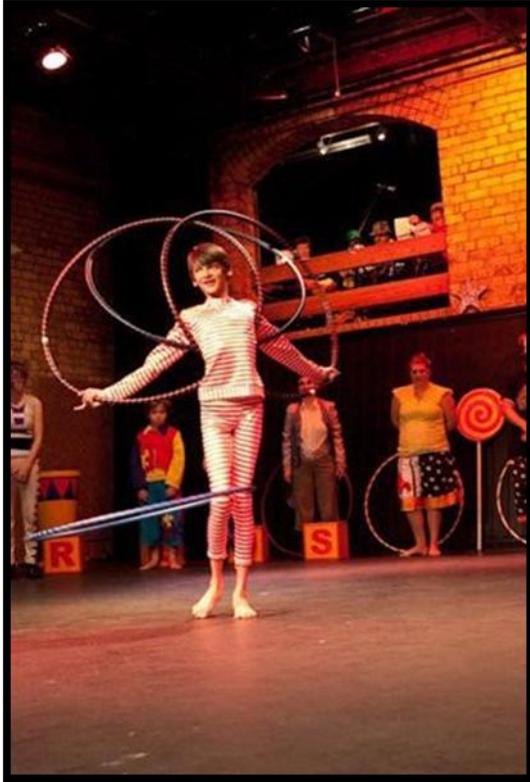
³ Toi Ora Live Art Trust provides a range of services for people who have experience of mental illness, see <http://www.toiora.org.nz>.

⁴ The Auckland Deaf Society provides social, recreational and sporting services for Deaf people, see <http://auckland-deaf.org.nz/>.

⁵ The Deaf Arts Network is an informal group that is affiliated with the Giant Leap Foundation.

⁶ The Kelston Deaf Education Centre is a residential school which provides services for Deaf and hearing impaired children and their families, see <http://www.kdec.school.nz/>.

Around 50 people were directly involved in Circolina's Leap, including performers, producers, musicians and support crew. Circolina's Leap was partially funded by the



'Think Differently' campaign (via the Ministry of Social Development's Family and Community Services Unit) and Creative Communities Auckland. It was supported by The Giant Leap Foundation (the 'Think Differently' campaign fund holder), Toi Ora Live Art Trust, the Deaf Arts Network, iSign, the Auckland Santa Parade, Karen Abplanalp who provided free professional photography and the Takapuna Pumphouse Theatre, which offered its facility for minimal cost for the two public performances and for dress rehearsals.

Creative Director Thomas Hinz has over 20 years experience in community circus as the founder of Circus Fantasia in Rostock, Germany and Circus Kumarani (with Frances Kelliher) in Dargaville, New Zealand in 2003. Following the success of the Circolina's Leap programme Thomas and Frances have recently formed the Circability Trust, a charitable trust for community circus projects in New Zealand.

The Circolina's Leap programme received \$24,250 grants funding, which leveraged around \$17,000 in in-kind and voluntary assistance including venue hire, marketing and promotion, production assistance and facilitation of the rehearsals and performances. In-kind assistance also contributed to a high standard of production, with the use of a professional performance venue, quality props, costumes and facilitators and set design. Costumes were provided by the Auckland Central Santa Parade organisers, in return for Auckland Community Circus agreeing to take part in the 2012 Christmas Parade down Queen Street.

The Toi Ora Film Unit filmed elements of the process of creating the combined shows and the two performances. Toi Ora clients also created props, played live accompanying music for the performances and were involved in set design (including painting the set during the shows).

Objectives of Circolina's Leap

The objectives of the Circolina's Leap community circus programme were as follows.

- Produce benefits for the individuals involved, including building confidence, making friends, having fun, learning new skills and enhancing skill levels, increasing self esteem, motor skills, fitness, communication and social skills.
- Connect people of all ages and abilities and create a sense of family and a creative community - provide an opportunity for people to be part of an amazing group.
- Change public perceptions of disabled people in the community.
- Produce a range of wider community benefits and unexpected outcomes, for example connecting families and providing the Takapuna Pumphouse with an opportunity to support a community project.
- Collaborate with diverse groups and inspire creativity across multidisciplinary art forms – for example Toi Ora painters, musicians, drama and film makers were involved in the production. The Giant Leap Foundation facilitated communication between Deaf and non-Deaf participants.
- Support the growth of community circus in Auckland.

Evaluation objectives

The overall purpose of the evaluation is to capture its story and impact. Specific objectives are to present:

1. The story of this programme – what happened, the process and who was involved.
2. Perceived benefits and impacts of the programme for participants, parents, carers and families, circus teachers, the project team and the wider community.
3. Expected and unexpected outcomes, including connections made and opportunities that arose.
4. Lessons for future similar projects.



Methods

The methods utilised in the evaluation were as follows.

Method	Description
1. Self assessment by a sample of participants	At the first joint rehearsal on 1 April 2012, 16 participants or their caregivers completed a short written form on their experience with circus to date, how they came to be involved and one thing they would like to get out of taking part in Circolina's Leap (see Appendix Two).
2. Short interviews with participants	Short face to face interviews took place with 16 participants/carers at the second dress rehearsal on what they like best so far, one thing they have learnt, how the programme could be improved and any other comments. A further person sent email feedback on these questions.
3. Audience feedback on both performances	<p>Audience members were given a written feedback form as they arrived at the theatre and were asked to complete this straight after each performance (see Appendix Three). Forty feedback forms were received from the first show on the 18th of May, and 48 forms were received from the second show on the 19th of May (88 in total).</p> <p>The audience was also filmed entering and leaving the performances.</p>
4. Discussion Forum after the 18 May performance	Straight after the first performance on 18 May, the audience and key stakeholders such as funders were invited to attend a discussion on the performance, the wider community circus research project and any lessons and issues arising.
5. Debriefs	<p>Post performance group reflections with 35 participants were held, as to what they gained from being part of Circolina's Leap.</p> <p>A focus group discussion post the performances was also held with the project team for the programme (the Creative Director, Project Manager, Toi Ora Director, Giant Leap Foundation Director and a Deaf representative – all of these people except for the Project Manager were also performers in the shows).</p>

Feedback from individuals was collected by the author, with the assistance of Frances Kelliher for methods one and two, and Thomas Hinz for method 5 - the post performance group debrief sessions with participants.

Each performance was also filmed, with a three minute clip posted on the Auckland Community Circus website (www.communitycircus.co.nz) and Facebook page. A DVD of one of the shows will be provided to performers and their families, as part of a planned social gathering to watch this performance together as a group. In future, a short film and longer documentary of the process and performance may be created and made publicly available.



Findings

The evaluation findings begin by describing the Circolina's Leap programme, followed by the findings from each of the evaluation methods, a discussion and conclusion.

The Circolina's Leap Programme

A common approach for community circus programmes is to teach a group of people circus skills over a period of time, which then culminates in one or more public performances showcasing those skills. Shaping the skills learned into a public performance is considered to enhance the experience for participants by providing a shared focus, building confidence, impelling people to overcome fears, supporting team building and improving communication and social skills (Trotman 2012).

From March 2012, separate weekly circus skills classes were undertaken by Thomas Hinz, with the support of various volunteers for each group of people as follows:

- A children's community circus class at Grey Lynn Primary School and Grey Lynn Community Centre
- Adults with intellectual disabilities, who are based with Hohepa, plus one independent participant with physical disabilities
- Children, young people and adults from the Deaf community, via the Auckland Deaf Society, Deaf Arts Network and Kelston Deaf Education Centre
- Adults from the Toi Ora Live Arts Mental Health Trust.

Communication between Deaf and hearing people was facilitated by the Giant Leap Foundation and volunteers, with iSign support for the public forum held after the first performance. An interpreting student from AUT also provided support at several of the rehearsals, at no cost. Budget restraints did not allow for the employment of qualified sign language interpreters, although iSign provided an interpreter at one of the weekly rehearsals at the Kelston Deaf Education Centre, at no charge.

A hallmark of this programme is that it is truly all ages and abilities. The youngest participant was four years old and the oldest was over 60 years. People from the Deaf community interacted with hearing people, with mental health clients, with people with physical and intellectual disabilities, with children and non-disabled people. The programme involved a mix of ethnicities, people with significant acting and drama experience and those who had never before been on stage. Those with developed circus skills interacted with those completely new to any form of circus skill such as juggling, hula hoops, unicycling and diabolo.

As the classes got underway, Creative Director Thomas Hinz developed a concept and story line for the public performance. Together with the project team they decided to call the show 'Circolina's Leap'.

The Circolina Story

The basic premise of Circolina's Leap involves the central character Lina, who is in a wheelchair, overcoming a series of challenges and undertaking the same feats that able bodied people could, plus one feat that 'the strongest man in the world' could not. The story line is described by Creative Director Thomas as follows.

Our story is set in a Circus ... sometime in the past and in another country far away...

Here, the circus artists are a "family" of jugglers, acrobats, the strongest men in the world, fakirs and hula hoop artists who are rehearsing for their next show

A girl "Lina" appears, she is looking for friends and a place to stay

She joins the rehearsals and becomes very friendly with the artists

The stage hands however become obsessed with money

Lina wants to rehearse the last acts but nobody has time anymore, they are too busy looking for money

She is isolated and frustrated with people very busy around her

She goes up a high ladder, overcoming her fear of heights

She throws down money, child 'fairies' come and touch people's hearts and the bad guys disappear

People are like before, ready to finish their rehearsal and do their 'finale'

Lina has become a member of the circus community, and is given a new name "Circolina"

Thomas describes an underlying story line of Circolina being a metaphor for community circus in New Zealand. Community circus has recently arrived here, people don't really know what it is but it holds 'magic' in bringing people together. If community circus is not nurtured with people's time, energy and resources, community circus activity gets isolated and can't progress - it has to rise up, be active and seek support: "Community circus needs a home and friends!"

The Circolina Process

The weekly classes continued and each of the groups learned their 'part' in the performance. Deaf participants were invited to be part of a public performance a few weeks after the classes started. Three combined rehearsals were held (four hours long each), with one of these being a dress rehearsal which included costumes and props. All of the groups were given the story line and their 'lines', with opportunities to make suggestions and changes to the script. The script and story line became shorter and simpler over time, given time pressures and a need to create a feasible, quality performance in the time constraints and with limited joint rehearsal time.

The short time frame of the programme, small number of rehearsals and performances was a result of budget constraints and the difficulty of finding suitable times for the diverse groups to rehearse together. It was also considered that a short time frame with minimal rehearsals and shows would encourage participation in the project, as a stepping stone to taking part in similar projects in the future.

All of those involved were informed from the start of the programme that the process and people’s experience of Circolina’s Leap was being evaluated and that participation in the evaluation was voluntary.

Self assessment by participants

At the first joint rehearsal and practice session on 1 April 2012, 16 participants or their caregiver completed a self assessment form. This form asked people’s age, gender and ethnicity, before asking them to rate their experience with learning circus skills, why they got involved in Circolina’s Leap, the importance of key elements to them in terms of their involvement and one thing they would like to get out of the experience. Of the 16 people who completed this form, 10 were aged under 16 years and three each were aged between 16-24 or 25-44. Eight were female and seven were male and most described themselves as New Zealand European (plus one as English/New Zealand and one as Scottish/New Zealand).

Eight people filled the form out themselves; in seven cases their parent or caregiver filled it out in consultation with them, or for them.

Experience learning circus skills

People were asked to rate their experience to date learning circus skills, with 1 being none at all to 10 being very experienced.

None at all										Very experienced
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
2		3	1	4	2	2		1	1	

These people reported a range of circus experience to date, from none to a lot of experience. Most described their experience as being mid-range (3 to 7).

Why did you get involved, what brought you here?

The key drivers for taking part were through parents (3) or a friend (3), already being part of a circus group (4), a desire to try something new and learn new skills (2), having a taster experience and wanting to learn more (2) or wanting to have fun (1).

How important are these in terms of being involved in Circolina's Leap?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Having fun								2	1	13
Making friends	1				1	1	1	2	2	8
Learning new skills					2	1	2	3	2	6
Performing in public	1		1			2	2	2	2	6

Having fun was considered the most important aspect of being involved in Circolina's Leap, followed by making friends, performing in public and learning new skills.

One thing you would like to get out of taking part in Circolina's Leap

The main things sought from being involved were learning new skills, building confidence, performing in public, being challenged and having fun with friends.

Short interviews with participants

During the second combined rehearsal on 6 May 2012, short interviews were held with some of the participants on:

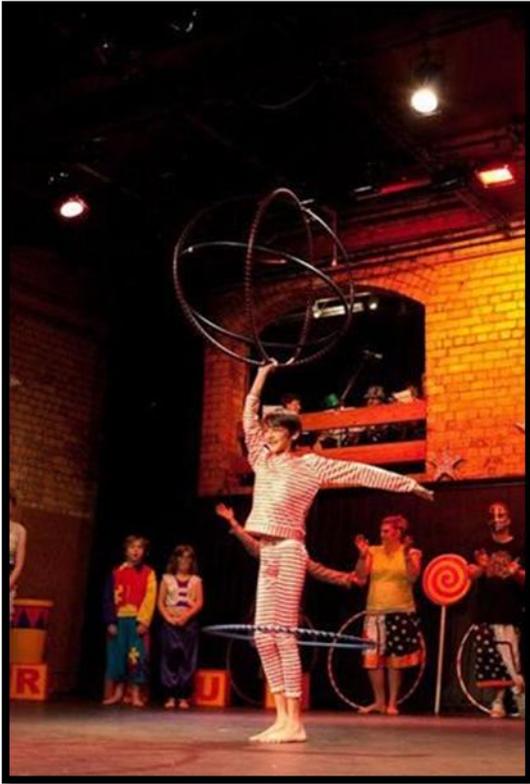
- what they like best so far
- one thing they have learnt
- how the programme could be improved
- any other comments.

The purpose of these short interviews was to 'take the temperature' in terms of how people were finding the process to date, what they were enjoying most and what could be improved.

What people liked best

Twelve people each stated that what they were enjoying most was learning new skills: "The kids taught me to juggle really quickly, they are very cool kids"; and having fun: "The stage hands are really funny". Making new friends was what five people liked best and three mentioned that they wanted to keep doing circus after the shows were over.

One person liked the combination of the various groups: "Other groups bring different energies and different styles; it's fun to work with new people as everyone brings something different". One person was enjoying the physical motion and coordination and one child was happy about getting a day off school to take part in the 18 May performance.



One parent of a child participant noted that "Children don't question the disabilities of others, they aren't scared, they are accepting and don't pigeon hole like adults do". A Deaf participant enjoyed "...being involved in a mainstream project as a Deaf group. Normally Deaf people are used to segregation due to language, culture and identity...this helps Deaf people to open our eyes to the bigger world out there, it builds our confidence and self esteem to a new level. It teaches us to respect others and work out communication strategies".

One thing people have learnt

One person with experience in performing noted that "This is a humbling opportunity as an actor to work with all the different people, disabled, deaf, mental health etc". Several learnt that they like performing, or were learning about stage presence.

One person learnt that everyone needed to work together; others were learning new skills and the need to step up to meet the challenge posed by the show, especially in terms of the improvisation it called for.

One person felt that this was a very brave, ambitious project. The project manager was asked "Are you scared or do you trust it will be all right?"

How to improve the programme

Most people were happy with the programme as it was. Several people identified a need for more practicing and organisation. One person felt that more time was needed, and noted that "not everyone is at rehearsal, [they are] not taking it seriously". One person felt that the participants needed to smile more on stage and improve their expression. Another suggested giving the Deaf group text reminders of the next practice and group rehearsals.

Audience feedback

As people arrived at both shows they were informed that the performance and the project overall was being evaluated. They were given a feedback form and asked to take a few minutes to complete it after the show and hand it back. Both audiences were very cooperative regarding this request.

A total of 271 people attended the performances. The second show on 19 May was sold out, with some people turned away at the door. On 18 May a total of 40 feedback forms were returned, and on 19 May 48 forms were returned. Thus around a third of all attendees provided feedback on the shows. Note that given the similarity of response between the two shows the comments made have been combined.

Please rate your response to the show

Show	1 Didn't enjoy it	2	3 It was ok	4	5 It was great!	Total
18 May				8 (20%)	32 (80%)	40 (100%)
19 May				7 (15%)	41 (85%)	48 (100%)
Both				15 (17%)	73 (83%)	88 (100%)

All respondents enjoyed the shows, with around four out of five giving it the highest rating possible. Slightly higher numbers gave the 19 May performance the top rating. People were asked to give the main reasons for their rating, with responses for both shows summarised below, in order of highest to lowest mention, including quotes reflecting the comments made.

A quality show

The highest number of comments related to the high quality of the show; that it was professional, impressive, well organised, involved good performances, good props, costumes, had a good story, lots of effort was put in, and a good support crew:

"It was professional, creative, courageous, colourful, challenging"

"Awesome costume, band and performers".

Inclusive and integrated

Next highest mention was the inclusive nature of the show, in terms of integrating all ages and abilities, being inclusive of everyone, people supporting each other and that there was good team work:

"I loved the huge range of ages and abilities. It felt so inclusive and encouraging"

"Seeing the abilities of each performer was amazing"

"As a Registered Nurse I have worked a lot with disabled people. At one time people used to hide their physically or mentally disabled children and it is a great pleasure to now see them taking their place in the community with pride and pleasure".

Performers loved it

Significant numbers of people commented on the obvious enjoyment, fun, confidence and enthusiasm of the performers:

"It was colourful, lively, fun, well organised, the performers enjoyed it".

Engaging and entertaining

Comments here included the show's variety, with lots of different acts, that it was entertaining, fun and funny and that it engaged the audience:

"Great humour, great tricks".

Touched hearts and minds

Comments here were that the show was inspirational, uplifting, touching and heart warming:

"It was inspirational. We were mesmerised throughout the show, I was absolutely blown away and moved. Thanks, please do another show!"

Please rate any impact the show has had on your view of disability

Show	1 No change	2	3 Some change	4	5 Major change	Total
18 May	3 (8%)	1 (2%)	9 (26%)	12 (34%)	10 (30%)	35 (100%)
19 May	9 (21%)	4 (10%)	11 (25%)	8 (19%)	11 (25%)	43 (100%)
Both	12 (15%)	5 (6%)	20 (26%)	20 (26%)	21 (27%)	78 (100%)

Ninety percent of respondents for the 18 May show and 69% of respondents for the 19 May show noted some to major change – with some registering no change commenting they already knew how great people with disability were. For example: "I am Deaf myself so I knew Deaf/disabled were capable of this. But good to showcase that "Disabled can do it" to the wider community".

When feedback from both shows is combined, 79% of respondents stated that the show had some to major impact on their view of disability. The main reasons for people's responses are summarised below, from highest to lowest mention, including illustrative quotes.

Quality performance and participation

Over half of the respondents noted being impressed with the quality of the performance. A significant number also commented on the capability, joy and energy of the performers, how well everyone interrelated, the range of ability involved and interactions with the audience:

"It was wonderful to see them all have a go, especially little Lina who left me very emotional"

"Joy brings us all together and a common goal achieved can break down barriers"

“Magic to see how much everyone could do but I always knew that with enough love and dedication anything is possible”

“Your performers are great and show the audience how much they can achieve, it was a gutsy performance”.

When supported people can achieve

Around ten percent of respondents stated that the performance had reinforced their view that with the right support people can achieve almost anything:

“The success of the show and the pleasure and entertainment given and gained, by every one of the performers only confirms what we already knew; that with the right support anyone can do anything and well”.

“I believe in lack of discrimination, everyone has varying abilities they just need to be released”.

“I know they can do it, everyone can but to show that you can to such a big audience of 120 WOW! Seeing interaction with Deaf and hearing through sign language on stage was dramatic and inventive and fun”.

A moving experience

Around ten percent of respondents commented that they felt touched or moved by the performance:

“I lost my daughter last year, she was 20 and had Cerebral Palsy. It brought her back to me”

“Made me cry, I look forward to another show Circolina Two”



"I was like Lina".

If you know any of the performers or support crew today, what impacts have you noticed for them during their participation in this circus programme – what have they got out of it?

Confidence

Increased confidence was the factor most mentioned:

"She appeared more confident than I have seen her before when performing in public"

"Confidence and knowledge that they can perform in an outstanding show"

"We came to support X and from what we have noticed he has come right out of his shell".

Sense of achievement and pride

Closely related to increased confidence, the impacts with the next highest mention were a sense of achievement, pride, satisfaction and focus/purpose:

"Sense of achievement, along with the sheer pleasure of being part of such a fun and fulfilling experience"

"Being part of a huge family, cooperative effort, mixed gender challenges. Seeing/working with mixed disabilities, or should I say mixed abilities".

Other comments were that people had noticed the fun had by the person they knew, the joy of performing that they had experienced, that they had learnt new skills or been happy to be included and part of a group. One person each noted that the person they knew had learnt about perseverance, or to be more accepting of people with disabilities. One person hadn't realised the capability their family member had:

"My sister is both stronger and better coordinated than I had realised! I will have her chopping wood yet!"

What else do you want to say about the show?

Over sixty respondents made positive comments here, with key themes being:

It was fantastic, well done

"Thank you the show was amazing/brilliant fantastic, I/we thoroughly enjoyed it, well done"

"Just that it was wonderful and I am very pleased that I came, it was a great Saturday afternoon"

"My cheeks ache from laughter and smiles, my fingers sting from applause, my eyes are wet with tears of pride and laughter"

“Brilliant production – great combination of circus style with people whose disability usually causes doors to close rather than open”.

Please continue doing this

“Magnificent Circus Director and Narrator – congratulations to you and your crew, more shows please!”

“I hope you can expand the concept”

“Keep it up guys, I am in awe of you and I had tears”

“Keep up the hard work, we need more of these shows”.

We would come again and tell others

“I thought everyone gave their best and would recommend others to come to future events”

“I reckon that everyone must come and watch the show, it was awesome, I would come again to support them all”.

Suggestions for improvement were that:

- More leadership be given to people with disabilities. Thomas [as the Circus Director] could be less upfront, more in support
- Should be on as a school holiday programme, far more beneficial for kids to see than current commercial shows. Joy evident everywhere and great to introduce sign language
- Would have been good for them to have had a little more time on some of the tricks (although time is obviously a factor!).

Debriefs

Participant feedback

The week after the performances, during the final class for this programme, participants in the programme were asked a few questions about how they found the experience of taking part in Circolina's Leap. Each person was asked to complete an assessment sheet, before answering some questions as a group. Nine people each took part from Hohepa, the Deaf Group and Toi Ora, with seven children from the Grey Lynn circus classes providing feedback (35 people in total).

Did you enjoy being involved in the project?

	Loved it	Liked it	Neutral	Didn't enjoy it	Hated it
Toi Ora Drama and Band	6	2	1		
Hohepa	8	1			
Deaf Group	7		2		
Grey Lynn kids	3	4			
Total (35)	24	7	1		
	68.5%	20%	1.5%		

All but one of the respondents reported loving or liking being part of the project.

Did any of these happen for you through being involved in the project?

	Toi Ora Drama and Band	Hohepa	Deaf Group	Grey Lynn Kids	Total
Tried something new	9	7	9	6	31
Learnt about other people	7	7	9	7	30
Did something positive for the community	9	6	9	6	30
Challenged myself	7	6	9	7	29
Did something I am proud of	7	6	9	7	29
Worked with a group on a project	7	7	9	6	29
Developed my confidence	7	7	9	6	29
Felt happy	6	7	9	7	29
Made friends	6	8	8	6	28
Learnt new things	6	7	9	6	28
Felt proud of myself	6	7	7	7	27
Did something positive for myself	5	7	9	6	27
Explored my talents	5	6	8	6	25
Felt well, healthy	5	6	8	6	25
Learnt new skills	5	4	9	7	25
Took a risk	7	5	6	5	23
Created good / interesting art	5	5	4	5	19

Based on the scores above, the Deaf group gave the highest ratings overall in terms of what they got out of the project. Overall, participants rated highest that they learnt

something new, learnt about other people, did something positive for the community, felt happy, grew in confidence, challenged themselves, worked on a group project, did something they are proud of and made friends. Interestingly, creating good/interesting art and taking risks were rated lowest.

Would you like to do more circus?

	Definitely	Yes, if possible	Maybe	I don't think so	Never again
Toi Ora Drama and Band	3	5	1		
Hohepa	6	2		1	
Deaf Group	8		1		
Grey Lyn kids	6	1			
Total	23	8	2	1	

Of the 34 who responded, 31 (91%) would like to do more circus.

Focus group questions

This section summarises participant feedback from group reflections held after completing the written forms summarised above. The feedback is combined.

What was the best thing for you about taking part in this circus project?

"It was fun, cool and exciting".

In order of highest to lowest mention responses here were having fun, learning new skills, working as a group, making new friends/meeting new people, achieving a great show, being challenged and the excellent venue.

Is there anything that you didn't like or enjoy?

Eight separate comments were given here as follows. I didn't get to watch the show from the band perspective [the band sat up above the performance]; people from Hohepa came to the show but couldn't get in [the second show was sold out]; getting music timing right; juggling was hard to learn; not enough rehearsals; hurt myself on the nose on Friday's show; missing out on the after party and I wanted to be part of all the acts.

How can we do better next time?

Eleven people commented here, four of whom suggested having more practice time and rehearsals. Two suggested more shows or seats, or advertising that bookings are essential to avoid people missing out on the day. More participation, more and different equipment, more space backstage and higher skill levels were suggested by one person each.

Of those interested in doing more circus, why would you like to do more circus?

The main response here was because circus is fun, cool, good for meeting new people and learning new skills:

“Who doesn’t like to have more fun, it’s very enjoyable”

“Fun and enjoyable, like a party, awesome experience”.

What else you would like to say about this circus project?

“Everybody independent of abilities was able to be onstage and in the show and get the same feeling”.

Ten people commented here, with one person each noting that the project was fun, humbling, a positive environment and a “fantastic enterprise”. One person noted that it was educating to work with Deaf people, and two that they were impressed with how well the groups mixed and learned together.

One person suggested having more clowns and another developing a creative centre with classes all day and groups mixing more.



Project Team Debrief and Discussion Forum

“This feels like a great collaboration, with experienced people holding it together. There was great energy, people were turned away at the door, it [the second show] was packed to the rafters, people came out with tears in their eyes. Now we have set the bar, it’s hard to impress people. It’s been a really good experience” (Project Team member).

The feedback from an open Discussion Forum on 18 May straight after the first show and from a debrief with the core project team on 22 May is summarised below. Outside of the core project team the Discussion Forum attracted one person with a background in professional and community arts, one representative from Deaf Aotearoa, two of the Deaf performers and an interpreter. The Discussion Forum focused mainly on feedback on the first performance.

Short timeframe and minimal rehearsing

“The speed was exciting, it made people make decisions and keep moving. The performance date was the key driver” (Project Team member).

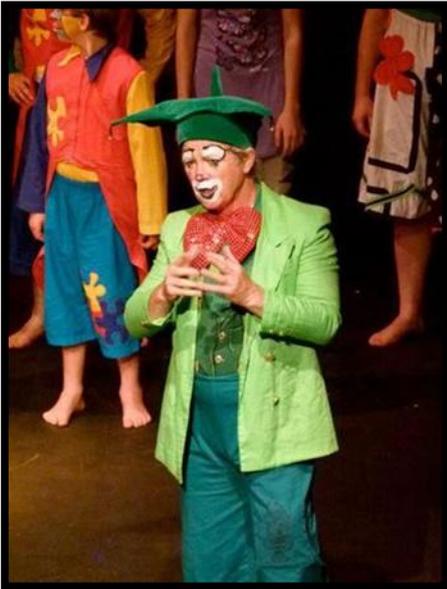
The timeframe for Circolina’s Leap was around 12 weeks from the start of the weekly classes to the end of the second performance. This included only three combined rehearsals and not everyone could attend each rehearsal. This created some risk and nervousness as to whether a quality show could be produced. Some people enjoyed the tight timeframe and ‘organic’ nature of the process, while others would have been more comfortable with a bit more time and structure.

Significant changes were made as time went on – for example the show got reduced down to one hour, with no intermission. “We made some good calls on the way through in terms of cutting scenes; it was quite tricky at times ensuring that everyone still had decent parts to play and communicating the changes made” (Project Manager).

The story line

Some people felt the story line could have been clearer, while for others it was important for people to interpret the story line as they saw fit: “It’s every individual’s take on the story that’s part of it”. It was noted that there was some discussion among the audience as to the story line, which was considered positive.

Compared for example with theatre, which usually involves a script, community circus involves a lot of improvisation which is perceived to be both a strength and a challenge, allowing for fluid development but also placing pressure on people to shift and adapt. At the same time having a narrative thread to hold it together was seen as important.



The positives

Key positive features included the obvious fun and enjoyment of the participants, improved confidence and the combining of different groups and what came out of that: "Seeing the disabled performers mix and mingle after the show is 'Wow!'" Positive feedback was given on the visual spectacle, use of space, props, lighting design and costumes. Another perceived positive was the fluid interaction between the Circus Director (Thomas) and two narrators, one hearing and one Deaf on stage. The narration was well integrated within the performance and looked "natural and normal".

The multidisciplinary nature of the programme was seen as very positive, involving a wide range of people and abilities but also music, dance, painting, theatre and circus.

One of the Deaf participants commented that they felt very equal in this show, that people were friendly, made the effort and that a new level of respect across the abilities was created: "Circus is good proof of the possibilities of joining together" (Deaf performer). Having the Deaf narrator onstage was very affirming for the Deaf community: "The Deaf community often feel segregated, but this opened the door to the community".

The Circus Director and Deaf narrator worked together onstage and were seen as key to holding the performance together: "Thomas and Rachel were the 'on-stage knitters'".

Key highs were several accomplished theatre representatives giving 'amazing' feedback; touching people's hearts; the little dramas and interactions among participants; and the bringing together of all ages, abilities and multidisciplinary art forms.

Deaf participants experience

The Deaf community taking part in the circus programme was diverse, involving children, young students and adults. Some found it hard to make the commitment and didn't know what was involved. People were told around a month into the weekly classes that there would be a performance and lots of people came to be involved 'by accident'. Many people gave it a go while others wrote their name down but didn't come. Those who stayed reportedly gained a greater understanding of what commitment is about.

The performance was perceived to be good for building confidence and willingness to take more risks and some of those involved would like to carry on with circus⁷ (especially some of the children).

⁷ Note that funding has not been obtained for ongoing classes at the time of writing.

Challenges

The short timeframe was a challenge and hard on those involved, with long hours involved for the small core team: "I'm exhausted" (Project Manager). The short time frame added risk to the project, for example when funders and organisations such as Creative New Zealand were invited: "It's risky inviting Creative New Zealand people along to something that might not work, but the more risk the more reward" (Project Manager).

Working with a Deaf group was a new thing for Thomas and Frances and one of the greatest strengths and challenges, in terms of ensuring that everyone understood what was happening and having communicators available. Facilitating communication between Deaf and hearing participants was an ongoing challenge, especially with frequent script changes.

The stability and commitment of the group who access mental health services was favourably commented upon – this was seen as partly a result of the work Toi Ora has done with this group and their previous experience in theatre. They operate like a 'troupe' and have knowledge of the demands of performing.

Some of the personalities involved made the process 'interesting' at times. Also some challenges arose regarding the sound and lighting in the second show, plus getting timing right with music and activity on stage: "Next time we will get the technical stuff sorted earlier, sound, lighting and so on. We will develop the script a bit earlier – the lines changed all the time, there were lots of changes all the time".

What next?

"Community circus aligns well with Toi Ora. It normalises the other, is about diversity and inclusion, this is going to open other doors and create more opportunities" (Toi Ora Project Team member).

A key challenge is where to go next with Circolina's Leap. A lot of video material of the process and performances has been collected. The intention is to develop a short teaser/promo of the show first, followed by a DVD of the performance. One aspiration is a feature movie/documentary of this project.

One possibility is to look for opportunities to perform parts or the whole show again: "We will be flexible and see what happens. We now have a company called Circolina, so they can be called upon to perform". The Pumphouse reportedly want more performances of the show.

"Circus is a ladder, [Circolina's Leap] is on the first rung, so we continue, maintain motivation, keep people together". In November 2012 as part of "Circolina's Community Leap", workshops and shows are planned engaging new audiences including Deaf, disability, youth, preschool, elderly and the wider public. This may also include photo exhibitions and film screenings.

Discussion

“It [Circolina’s Leap] was not about disability but possibility” (Toi Ora participant).

In just three months, Circolina’s Leap brought together over 50 people of all ages and abilities, the majority of whom were new to circus and performing, to produce a high quality circus show. The unique and interesting elements of this programme include:

- The wide range of ages and abilities involved, including members of the Deaf community
- The multidisciplinary art forms involved (circus, theatre, set design, music, painting, props and costume)
- The high quality of the production
- The short timeframe and limited budget, requiring significant voluntary effort
- The collaborative and high trust nature of the project.

Circolina’s Leap was produced and ‘held’ by a small group of experienced individuals who gelled together well and trusted each other as a team. Each member brought different strengths.

The original objectives of Circolina’s Leap related to providing benefits for participants, connecting people, changing perceptions of disability, producing community and unexpected outcomes and inspiring collaboration and creativity. A short assessment against these objectives follows, based on evaluation findings.

Benefits for participants

Benefits for participants from Circolina’s Leap are considerable and varied, with the most significant being having fun, learning new skills, building confidence, making friends, a sense of pride and achievement, learning about others, doing something positive for the community and working with others. The enjoyment, team work and pride of the performers was also obvious to audience members.

Most (91%) of participants asked would like to do more circus, because it is fun, cool, exciting and a way to make new friends, be challenged and work with others. Having the performances at a professional theatre, with high quality props, costumes and theatre direction, also heightened the experience for participants.

Members of the Deaf group gave the highest ratings overall in terms of what they learnt from the project. One Deaf participant noted that the Deaf community can feel isolated from the mainstream and that this project was valuable for its inclusive nature and the attention paid to integrating Deaf participants through interpreters and having two narrators onstage for Deaf participants and audience members.



Connecting people

A key goal of Circolina's Leap was to create an all ages and abilities experience and a new creative community. This has certainly been achieved, with many participants commenting on the power of working with people from diverse backgrounds and abilities. The focus on ability rather than disability was considered empowering, with people supporting each other and working together to pull the shows together. Now that this creative community has been established – the Circolina 'troupe' – the

challenge will be to develop that community through ongoing joint projects. The vehicle for this is the recently formed Circability Trust, which will develop further community circus opportunities from Circolina's Leap.

Change public perceptions of disability

Based on audience feedback from both shows, 79% of respondents considered that the show had impacted on their view of disability and 27% overall felt that it had had a major impact. This demonstrates the power of community circus to challenge perceptions of ability and disability. Key reasons given for this impact were the high quality of the performance and production and the obvious enjoyment, confidence, sense of achievement, pride and teamwork of the performers. Some audience members noted that the performance shows that people can achieve almost anything when well supported.

Wider community benefits and unexpected outcomes

Other than changing attitudes to disability and providing members of the public with an opportunity to witness a unique performance, wider community benefits relate to the connections made through this project. These include the connections made between the key organisations involved (Giant Leap Foundation, Auckland Community Circus, Hohepa, Toi Ora and the Deaf organisations), which are likely to lead to future collaborative projects.

A positive connection was made between the Pumphouse Theatre and the organisations concerned, especially Auckland Community Circus, which may also lead to ongoing joint initiatives. Auckland Community Circus and the Auckland Santa Parade established a useful connection, swapping costumes for Auckland Community Circus involvement in the 2012 Santa Parade. Connections and relationships were also forged among participants and their families, caregivers and supporters.

Collaborate and inspire creativity

The extent of the collaboration involved in Circolina's Leap was a first for the organisations involved and the source of some of the greatest rewards and challenges. Budget constraints kept paid sign language interpreters to a minimum, but this then required Deaf and hearing participants to develop strategies to communicate. Overall however, one of the most positive perceived aspects of this project was the way that it brought different people together around a common goal of learning skills and putting on a public performance. This required patience, team work and good facilitation, but yielded a richer performance and greater sense of enjoyment and achievement for participants.



The multidisciplinary nature of the creative aspects of the project is also noteworthy, in the way it developed skills in set design and incorporated live music, drama and circus skills. Circolina's Leap was in every sense a co-production, drawing on the talents of all to create a bit of magic.

Lessons for future similar projects from this experience are as follows.

- Obtaining a professional venue and investing in quality props, costumes and design raises the sense of pride and achievement for participants, impresses the audience and enhances the experience overall. There is a relationship between the quality of production achieved and the benefits experienced by those involved.
- Balance the pros and cons of allowing for a longer time period for the programme and more joint rehearsal. A shorter timeframe can create more chaos, risk and anxiety, but can also provide focus and bring out the best in everyone as people work together to achieve a challenging task. A longer timeframe can produce a more polished result and allow for more leadership from disabled participants and for more 'stars' to emerge.
- Having the structure of a story line holding the performance together was considered valuable, even if this story line was not clear to everyone in the audience (or to some participants). A narrative structure was considered important, otherwise the performance becomes an unconnected showcase of various circus skills.
- Seek to develop in-kind, mutually beneficial partnerships in projects like these, with venue providers and others who can assist with props, costumes and design.
- A range of skills is required to produce a programme such as this, including creative direction, facilitation, project management and people skills to manage all the

various dynamics. This programme was fortunate to have a core project team which had all these skills, who also saw the benefits of this project, liked each other and gelled as a team. If one of these elements is weak in a project such as this, then results may be compromised. Skilled 'holding' and management of this kind of project is critical.

- Circolina's Leap was created on a small budget from a range of groups and relied mainly on people resources. It is a skill in itself to draw together the resources required for a project such as this and to manage the resources throughout. Getting funders to performances if at all possible is desirable, so they can experience the results of their funding first hand. It is difficult to communicate the power of a project such as this in words. As such, filming and taking photographs throughout is recommended.
- Perhaps the key message to others looking to undertake similar projects is that this kind of work is challenging but hugely rewarding (in non-monetary terms). It is also very skilled work, which requires bringing together a range of people around the common aim of creative public performance. Circus skills provide the central thread from which to weave around other social and creative arts.



Conclusion

Circolina's Leap combined a range of art forms with a diverse range of people, over 12 weeks, to produce two stunning public performances. While the performances were the crowning events of this process, the deeper impacts of the project involve what it provided for participants, its inclusive and collaborative nature, the connections it has forged and the potential of these and the way it impacted positively on perceptions of ability and disability.

Circolina's Leap was produced on a shoestring budget, required a lot of in-kind and voluntary assistance and placed a lot of pressure on key individuals. Its short timeframe and minimal joint rehearsal created some risk, which was overcome through the experience of those holding it together and the goodwill of participants.

The key challenge from here will be to build upon the experience of Circolina's Leap, in terms of continuing to bring this new creative family together and resourcing future projects. Opportunities already identified include a documentary or film of the project and performing the whole show or parts of the show again for other audiences. This evaluation demonstrates a clear desire from the public and participants of Circolina's Leap for more of these kinds of initiatives.



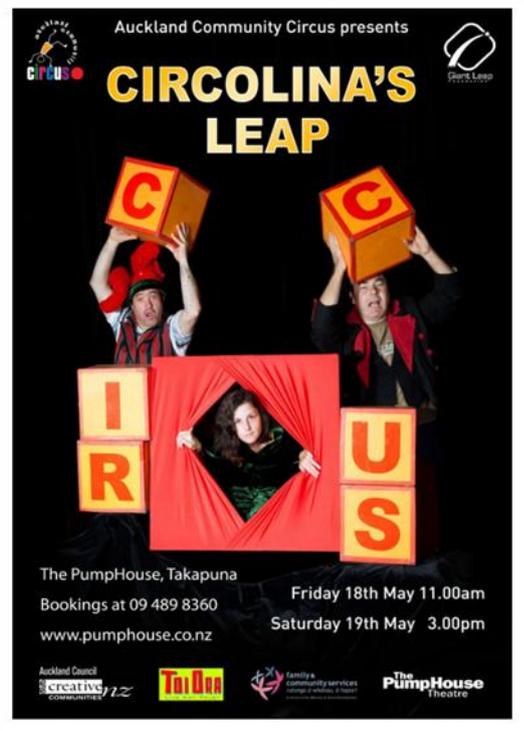
References

Trotman, Rachael, April 2012, *Building Character and Community, Community Circus: A Literature Review*, accessible at http://www.communitycircus.co.nz/Auckland_Community_Circus/Research.html.



Appendices

Appendix One: Circolina's Leap Programme



a very special thanks to
our friends, our family, our caregivers and our supporters

Auckland Council
creative COMMUNITIES nz

The PumpHouse Theatre.

family & community services
ratonga & whānau, & hapori
a service of the Ministry of Social Development

Sign

Toi Ora LIVE ART TRUST

DANnz Deaf Art Network

Giant Leap

Hohepa

the crew

Creative Director	Thomas Hinz
Production Manager	Frances Kelliher
Production Assistant	Gina Ferguson
Communication Facilitator	Charlie Grimsdale
Lights	The Pumphouse Theatre
Photos	Karen Ablanaip
Films	Greg & Sam Toi Ora
Sounds	Sam Yockney, Frances Kelliher, Bryn Watson
Wardrobe	Auckland Santa Parade, Jeannette Pinker, Cheryl Myers
Researcher	Rachael Trotman
Deaf Community Support	Susan Thomas (Residential Social Worker), Gethin Bridge (Trainee Interpreter)

the performers

Lina	Morgaina Matthias.
The Circus Director	Thomas Hinz.
The Circus Narrator	Rachel Coppage.
The Deaf Community Crew	Henare Browne, Meghan Coppage, Catherine Greenwood, Charlie Grimsdale, Tuhoi Henry, Alec Redvers Hill, Leroy Toetoe, Grace Moore, Chelsea Thomas.
The Grey Lynn Crew	Oliver Bennett, Langdon Boyle, Tarun Campion, Angus Ellis, Miro van Asbeck Fisher, Jonas Hinz, Ana Kelliher, Hugo Kelliher.
The Hohepa Crew	Tairi Andrew, Matthew Atkins, Patrick Betzmeir, Kaa Decker, Camilla Laurensen, Sherab Palmo, Andre Pascual, Simone Rueckert, Annabel Standbrook.
The Crew From Toi Ora Live Art Trust	
The Drama Group	David, Katherine, Matthew, Mick, Natasha, Roberto & Zek.
The Dancers	Sylvia & Wendy.
The Toi Ora Express Musicians	Denis, Erwin, Matthew, Moana, Paul, Raymond, Trimz & Wendy.
The Painters	Bruce & Matthew.

Developing community circus in Aotearoa New Zealand

Circolina's Leap is a showcase of skills learnt at weekly circus classes presented by Auckland Community Circus, in association with the Giant Leap Foundation and Toi Ora Live Art Trust. It involves diverse groups across multi-disciplinary art forms.

An evaluation of **Circolina's Leap** is occurring as part of a 2011/12 Lotteries Community Sector Research Fund project that aims to support the development of community circus in New Zealand. The research involves:

1. An international literature review on community circus.
2. A nationwide email survey of community circus related organisations and individuals.
3. Stakeholder interviews with up to 20 key players nationally and internationally.
4. A workshop at the February 2012 Auckland Circus Convention.
5. Four case study evaluations of circus programmes (Circolina's Leap in Auckland, and in Northland a SKIP based circus programme for pre schoolers, a school based programme and a high achievers programme).
6. The literature review and email survey reports can be downloaded at www.communitycircus.co.nz

There will be a research forum at 1pm on Friday 19th May following the first show at the Pumphouse. The forum will present key findings from the research project and seek views on how to use the research to foster community circus in New Zealand. NZSL interpreters will be provided for the forum.

We would love your feedback on the show and have a short questionnaire for you to fill out. All answers are anonymous and will be used to improve future shows and inform other community circus providers.

If you are interested in participating in community circus please leave your contact details on the clipboards provided in the lobby.



Appendix Two: Self Assessment Form: Circolina's Leap (April 2012)

Name: _____

Contact Details: _____

Age: (Please Circle) Under 16 16 – 24 25 – 44 45 – 64 64 years +

Ethnic Group (please state) Gender Male / Female

1. How much experience have you had learning circus skills? Please rate out of 10

(1 = None at all 10 = Very experienced)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. Why did you get involved in Circolina's Leap? What brought you here?

3. How important are the following to you, in terms of being involved in Circolina's Leap?

(1 = Not at all important 10 = Extremely important)

Learning new skills	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Performing in public	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Making friends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Having fun	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

4. Please tell us one thing you would like to get out of taking part in Circolina's Leap:

Please state who filled out this form (tick one)

I filled this out myself

These are my answers filled in by my caregiver

My caregiver has interpreted this and answered for me

THANK YOU - YOUR FEEDBACK IS MOST APPRECIATED!

Appendix Three: Audience Feedback Form 18 & 19 May 2012

We are evaluating this community circus programme and would love your feedback on the show. All answers are anonymous and will be used to improve future shows and inform other community circus providers.

1. Please rate your response to the show by circling one number below:

Didn't enjoy it	It was ok	It was great!
1	2 3	4 5

Please give the main reasons for your rating above.

2. Please rate any impact the show has had on your view of disability (circle one number).

No change	Some change	Major change
1	2 3	4 5

Please give the main reasons for your rating above.

3. If you know any of the performers or support crew today, what impacts have you noticed for them during their participation in this circus programme – what have they got out of it?

4. What else do you want to say about the show?

THANK YOU FOR COMING AND FOR COMPLETING THIS FORM, IT IS MUCH APPRECIATED! PLEASE PUT YOUR FORM IN THE BOXES PROVIDED IN THE FOYER.

If you wish to register an interest in learning circus skills please leave your name and contact details at the desk in the foyer.