

London's Calling — Medium

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Justin Durham hoists himself up the studio-made performance windows then crawls across the grid suspended 17 feet above the Actors Gymnasium stage. After securing his performance equipment, he lets the aerial straps hang, then makes his way across the grid and back down the windows to practice his routine for the upcoming Summer Salon showcase.

Durham, 18 and a 2014 graduate of New Trier High School in Wilmette, Illinois, has been attending the gymnasium in Evanston since he was a toddler. Now, 15 years after taking his first circus class, Durham has made a big decision.



Instead of enrolling in college like many of his friends, Durham is moving across the Atlantic to attend the National Center for Circus Arts in London. Although accepted into a handful of universities including the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, his passion for performing is unwavering.

“I’ve always wanted to be a performer,” he said. “I don’t know how to explain it. I just feel comfortable on stage. I was considering going to college but I also wanted to be continue circus school. Whatever college I ended up at, it would need to be near a circus program.”

“He had a choice,” said Julie Lavin, his mother. “I asked him, ‘Where is your heart?’ He chose London.



“It’s a good feeling to see that he has found something that he loves doing at such a young age,” she said. “People search their whole lives to find something that resonates with them, and it’s even more fulfilling when that passion is met with talent. I just want to see him be happy.”



The decision to forgo college for circus school came as no surprise to those closest to Durham. After all, the Actors Gymnasium has been his primary playground since the age of three.

“When it’s your way of having fun, you embody it,” said Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, instructor and co-owner of the Actors Gymnasium. “Justin is a triple threat. He is an amazing actor, dancer and can do anything circus-wise.”

Durham’s fearlessness, commitment to learning the craft, and taking criticism and growing from it sets him apart from students Hernandez-DiStasi has had over the years.

“Circus is not easy, it hurts. But Justin is very dedicated, very attentive,” Hernandez-DiStasi added. “He’s totally dedicated to the art form.”



Durham caught the circus bug early. As a toddler, Durham would lift himself out of his own crib, his mother recalls.

“He was non-stop. It was very challenging to contain him,” Lavin said. “Justin was the child who would climb on top of the playground equipment, where you weren’t supposed to be. I’d let him because I knew he would be OK.”



After seeing an ad for the Actors Gymnasium, his mother decided to give it a try. Although Durham played baseball and soccer, circus was where he found the most enjoyment. The years spent at the gym further fueled his desire as a performer.

“The more I did it, the more I wanted to get better,” Durham said.



Although his mother has mixed emotions about his move to London, she is proud of her son.

“This was his goal, his passion, he made it happen.”

