

# Circus gyms are surviving in world where Ringling Bros. can't. Here's how.

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Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi didn't have to run away to join the circus. She was born into it.

Her parents, themselves circus performers, reared their troupe of children under big tops. Hernandez-DiStasi began performing when she was 7, and when she flew through the air with the greatest of ease, it was one of her brothers who caught her or her dad who spotted her.

All she had ever known was the circus, so in the early 1990s, she left to find out what else was out there.

Now, Hernandez-DiStasi is the artistic director and a co-founder of the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, one of the handful of gyms in the Chicago area that train students in the circus arts.

There are still people that come to the gyms because they want to run away and join the circus, but the meaning of that dream has changed. The most iconic circus in America, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, will end its 146-year run in May. But the fascination with the death-defying acts remains, though in different forms, and dozens of smaller circuses perform throughout the country.



Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, left, keeps an eye on members of DePaul theater students on March 2, 2017, during an aerial arts class at the Actors Gymnasium inside Noyes Cultural Center in Evanston. Harmony Zhang, front, navigates the silk rope. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

Circus arts have been infused into acts away from the big top. Hernandez-DiStasi is a living example. Performers in varying disciplines have reason to learn the skills, and fitness enthusiasts are interested enough to try the tricks.

As a result, the half dozen or so circus gyms in the Chicago area have crafted their business models to suit.

"My generation was circus from birth to death practically. People didn't leave the circus," said Hernandez-DiStasi, who performed with Ringling Bros. "Because circus has changed, people don't have that option anymore. ... You have to diversify."

That's true for the students she teaches and for the gym itself, Hernandez-DiStasi said. Though circus arts is the Actors Gymnasium's most popular class, it also teaches contortion, clowning and gymnastics, for example.

As theater students from [DePaul University](#) unwind from fabric suspended from the ceiling after an aerial class in one room, small children stand in a circle and eagerly watch an instructor next door. The gym also trains actors from Lookingglass Theatre in the circus arts.



Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, left, watches Harmony Zhang, front, and other DePaul University students during a March 2, 2017, aerial arts class at the Actors Gymnasium inside Noyes Cultural Center in Evanston. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

Instead of perfecting one skill, Hernandez-DiStasi teaches her students how to work their bodies to learn anything.

"It's like everything else," she said. "If you're a dancer and all you can do is dance, then your options are going to be a lot smaller."

Aloft Circus Arts in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood also focuses on teaching strong fundamentals in its full-time professional training program, said Shayna Swanson, artistic director, owner and founder of the circus gym. Everyone in the program learns to tumble, juggle and do some acrobatics.

Most of the gym's students attend classes for fun, but in 2013, it launched a full-time training program for those who want to go pro. It started out as a nine-month course, but the instructors soon realized that wasn't cutting it, Swanson said. The class that started in 2016 will graduate after two years of training. Tuition is \$9,500 per year.

Many of the full-time students aspire to join small circus companies or start their own, Swanson said, so that's what the gym trains them for. In addition to the fundamental skills, students graduate from the two-year program with a specialty.



Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, center, teaches Teddy Boone, above, how to handle the Spanish rope on March 2, 2017, as she works with DePaul University theater students during an aerial arts class at the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

"Most of the shows are looking for somebody who can take part in everything but then have their one shining moment," she said.

Sydney Billings, 17, majors in aerial fabrics in Aloft's full-time program, training to do tricks on a silk attached to the ceiling, like ballet in the air, she said. Though her aspirations after graduation aren't specific, Billings knows she wants to work with a smaller company. There she can help create shows and be more connected to audience members.

When she performs, it's like she's reading from her diary to the audience, she said.

"(It's) a very intimate thing," Billings said. "It's hard to do that when there are 10,000 people sitting in a giant theater watching you."

When Ringling Bros. ends in May, those large-scale circuses will be fewer.

Having endured court battles with animal rights activists, Ringling Bros. parent company Feld Entertainment retired elephants from the show in 2016, sending them to its Center for Elephant Conservation in Florida. Ticket sales to the high-cost operation sank to the point of no return, the Florida company said.

After 146 years, the curtain is coming down on "The Greatest Show on Earth." The owner of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus told The Associated Press that the show will close forever in May.

Ringling Bros. has been through world wars, various economic cycles and plenty of change, but nothing Feld did — not even adding an interactive phone app — could save it this time.

Diseconomies of scale were likely at play, said Scott O'Donnell, executive director of the Circus World museum in Baraboo, Wis..



It still moves its hundreds of employees and herds of remaining animals by train, and books thousand-seat arenas in a world where smaller, nimbler circuses can quickly adapt to demands.

"(Ringling Bros.) was still a massive undertaking, unlike anything else that was on the market," O'Donnell said. "When you have that large of an overhead, it really becomes challenging in a way to make enough revenue to make it not only sustainable but also a profitable business venture."

Ringling Bros. has been around almost as long as baseball, and news of its impending end sent shock waves through the circus community. About 460 people will lose their jobs, said Juliette Feld, Feld Entertainment's Chicago-based chief operating officer.

Herself a child of the circus, Feld said in an interview last month that she had a difficult time delivering the news to the staff members — among them clowns, acrobats and technicians — whom she has known most of her life. She and her father, CEO Kenneth Feld, each traveled to one of the two Ringling Bros. tours in January to deliver the news. Standing in front of the performers and stagehands that compose the circus, she was among family.

Feld entertainment is working to help the employees find other jobs, she said. There are options for them — crew members and technicians could land on other Feld productions, for example, Juliette Feld said. But she couldn't say exactly what their futures would hold.

O'Donnell, from Circus World, said he has spent the months since the announcement trying to make one thing clear: Circus isn't dead; it's just evolving, like it always has.

Stopping in Chicago this year are tours of "Odysseo," a show under a big tent from Montreal-based entertainment company Cavalia, and Cirque du Soleil's "Luzia." A theater performance with life-size elephant puppets, "Circus 1903," is scheduled to start its Chicago run Tuesday.

Circus gyms play on that lingering interest too.

Trapeze School New York: Chicago built its business not to train professionals but to let folks feel what it's like to fly on the trapeze.

Some students come once just to say they've done it, while others come weekly for a workout, general manager Steve Hammes said.

Despite the continuing fascination with circus in its myriad forms, running a gym that teaches those skills is still hard, Hernandez-DiStasi said.

"We are struggling along, just as much as everybody in the arts," she said.

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