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Founder of Actors Gymnasium, Sylvia Hernandez DiStasi, to be inducted into Circus Ring of Fame

Evanston, IL — On January 13, 2019, Sylvia Hernandez DiStasi, the founder of Evanston's cutting edge Actors Gymnasium training facility, will be inducted into The Circus Ring of Fame along with other members of her acrobatic family who performed internationally together as the celebrated Hernandez Troupe.

The annual Ring of Fame ceremony, taking place in Sarasota, Florida, recognizes those who have made a significant contribution to the art and culture of the circus. This year, DiStasi is looking forward to gathering with her mother and brothers to receive the award. They will be honored for their much-loved acrobatic work, especially the teeterboard performances in which they catapulted each other high into the air, flipping, and flying, and landing on one another's shoulders. The Hernandez Troupe was active through the 1970s and '80s, including a three-year stint with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey from 1989-91.

Hernandez believes that what set her family troupe apart was the open, friendly, playful quality of their performance as well as their technical prowess. "Our act brought the audience in," she says. "We had so much fun and we made eye contact with the audience. We practiced intensively, so our risk was effortless, but we would sometimes miss tricks on purpose to build suspense, and then ask the audience's forgiveness. We would high-five each other after a really good trick. Other troupes were more serious."

Hernandez left the circus in 1990 and co-founded the Actors Gymnasium in 1995. At the January 13 ceremony, Hernandez is looking forward to seeing people she hasn't been in touch with for years, representatives of generations of "traditional circus families"—actual genetic families. "These days it's different, circus companies will hire the best acrobats from around the world and put them together in a group."

Does she think that the closeness of blood ties makes for a more trusting bond? After all, members of these ensembles doing risky athletic feats must rely on each other for their safety. "No," she says, confidently. "The beautiful thing about working in a physical way is that it generates an emotional connection, too. If you aren't already a family, you become one."

Through her work at the Actors Gymnasium, Hernandez fosters those bonds of connection among her students. "I recently participated in a 14-year reunion of former members of my teen ensemble," she says. "It is a beautiful thing to see the instantaneous recognition of that bond years later. Circus training makes us more human."

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