

Big top dreams

Circus arts make a comeback and Madison is ready to soar

BY VICTORIA DAVIS

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TRENDING

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STEPHANIE HOFMANN

A singing ringmaster. Glitz and glamour, juggling, clowns (sans creepy makeup) acrobats and... crossbows? More than a few surprises were in store when the Venardos Circus pitched its red-and-white striped big top tent in Madison's West Towne Mall parking lot. Stage lights, party music and the smell of fresh popcorn drew hundreds of families into the 90-foot by 60-foot traveling circus space. On opening night, Aug. 21, every one of the 350 seats was sold out.

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The theme of the night was, “Live Your Circus Dream.”

“We’re here to bring people together to witness the amazing things people are capable of when we set our minds to it, from the aerialist in the air to the acrobat balancing on her one hand,” says Kevin Venardos, founder and ringmaster of the Venardos Circus. “But there’s also another level, and that’s getting you to experience this live event in the company of your own community. You look to your left and you look to your right, and there’s all these families enjoying these wonders together.”

The audience whooped as Cuban aerial artists flew through the air held by only a leather strap around their heads. They screamed as performers from Romania shot crossbows at balloons with their eyes closed, the target only inches from their assistant’s head. The popularity of troupes like Venardos and Cirque du Soleil, which don’t use animals in performances, proves that human tricks are enough to enthrall an audience.

While in town, the members of the Venardos Circus had an important stop to make: Clown Kirk Marsh and silks artist Laura Gwendolyn Burch joined Venardos on a tour of the Madison Circus Space, a 10,400-square-foot facility scheduled to open in late October.

“More space for magic and wonder will always be in demand,” says Venardos. “If the community wants to get something done, they will make it happen, but it takes leaders like those at Madison Circus Space, people who are courageous and see things differently, to stand up and get something started. This new facility is a tangible example of that. It’s really breathtaking.”

VICTORIA DAVIS



Aerial silks artist Ilenay Peña Vives performs with Venardos Circus, which recently pitched a tent at West Towne Mall.

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The old Madison Circus Space was already impressive, but it was a rental and was torn down in 2018 to make room for a new cohousing development. After a temporary relocation and a significant capital campaign, the new facility stands out among its peers. The building at 2082 Winnebago St. has a large main performance studio with a 40-foot-high ceiling, sprung wood floors, and a pulley system with rig points for aerial and high flying trapeze. There is also a back room studio on the main level for private classes. Stairs and an elevator access the mezzanine and upper studio, used for dance, improv and other classes.

“There’s nowhere else in the country like what we’ve created,” says [Carly Schuna, a champion German wheel performer](#), teacher and co-founder of Madison Circus Space. “There are a lot of circus studios that teach classes and have open gym hours, but none that offers members access to 24-hour practice whenever they want.” The space, with its accessible model and commitment to expanding the circus arts to many different corners of the population, is groundbreaking.

Wisconsin is no stranger to big top bonanzas. The state is the birthplace of two major circuses: Ringling Bros., established in 1884 in Baraboo, which is still home to Circus World Museum, and P.T. Barnum’s Circus, founded in 1871 in Delavan. The circus arts continue to thrive at Mazomanie’s Wild Rumpus Circus camps and with such aerial troupes as Cycropia, Aerial Bliss and [Swing State Aerial](#). But today, Madison Circus Space is the largest circus community in Wisconsin, and it is hedging its bets on the public’s growing enthusiasm for the arts by opening this world-class training and performance facility.

Madison Circus Space has grown exponentially since Schuna and a few other circus aficionados founded it six years ago. At the start it had 12 members and offered three classes a week; it now has 80 members and hosts 30 classes a week. More than 250 people gather in the space regularly to practice acrobatics, juggling, aerial trapeze, German wheel and hoop dancing.

The idea for the facility arose from some personal problem-solving: Schuna needed a bigger space to practice her German wheel, a gymnastics apparatus made of two large steel hoops connected by stainless steel bars and pedals.

“I usually tell people it’s like a large hamster wheel for humans,” says Schuna. “And boy is it a space hog.”

Schuna taught herself to juggle at age 11 and later dabbled in circus yoga, or acro yoga. She joined the Madison Area Jugglers club when she moved to Madison in 2009.

There she met fellow juggler, and now partner, Luke Emery, along with **Josh Casey, a comedy juggler** (who holds a Guinness world record involving whoopee cushions) who had moved from California and had been juggling professionally for over 15 years.

“It was the highlight of my week,” says Schuna. “The jugglers were so friendly, and I was overwhelmed by what a great community it was. I really felt at home there.”

VICTORIA DAVIS



Carly Schuna found her second love when she tried the German wheel: “The wheel and I are definitely better together than we are separate.”

But Schuna says she truly fell in love with circus arts in 2012 when she and Emery first tried German wheel at the Madfest Juggling Festival. “I stepped on the wheel to rock and I knew this was the thing I had been meant to do my whole life,” says Schuna, who is now a five-time German wheel national champion. “Before that, I really thought you could only love a person, not an activity. But I was wrong. The wheel and I are definitely better together than we are separate.”

Finding the space to practice, however, proved to be a time-consuming and costly problem. Casey, who began juggling, stilt-walking and unicycling at age 11, was experiencing similar challenges, spending most of his time practicing his act in racquetball courts. “As a juggler, struggling for practice space was always an issue,” says Casey, who fell in love with combining

tricks and tosses. “It’s difficult to find a place with enough room to throw clubs around without worrying about hitting someone.”

In 2013, Casey, Schuna and Emery met with some hula hoop performing friends who were also looking for a space to practice and to collaborate with other performers. The three artists created a group of board members with core circus disciplines and then approached Adam Chern and John Young at Accipiter Properties.

Accipiter helped the group of 12 circus artists find a 4,000-square-foot warehouse with 18-foot ceilings, adjacent to the former Winnebago Studios. Madison Circus Space was born.

Madison Circus Space is now a nonprofit, with a board of directors, where people with their own circus arts businesses and certifications offer classes. Students, teachers and members all suggest ideas for variety shows and themed productions such as “Saturday at the Big Top” where all the aerialists dress up as cats and choreograph dances to Josie and the Pussycats songs.

Schuna and Emery offer German wheel, trapeze and aerial hoop classes for kids ages 12 and up through their business Head Over Wheels. Trapeze artist Hildy Feen and Mackenzie Dunn, an aerialist and teacher, who joined the Madison Circus Space in 2013, offer classes to promote inclusivity in circus.

Feen, who taught youth trapeze for the Wild Rumpus Circus with her business, A Taste Of Flying, now offers single-point trapeze class on Tuesday mornings for women ages 50 to 80.

“I started learning trapeze when I was 47, which is considered older for starting to learn trapeze dance,” says Feen, who has been performing trapeze and aerial dance for 20 years. “I wanted to expose other people to this class who think they aren’t strong enough or don’t have the right body or who think they’re too old. It’s just like any exercise. If you practice it and learn the skills, this is something you can do for a long time. Just because you’re older, it doesn’t mean you can’t hula hoop or juggle or dance.”



Hildy Feen started learning trapeze when she was 47. She now teaches trapeze to women ages 50-80.

Dunn's aerial class, offered through Swing State Aerial, also centers around female empowerment, encouraging women of all body types and sizes to participate. "As a person who has never had the standard, lean aerial body, I sometimes struggled in classes because my body made it different in regards to how I needed to approach things," says Dunn. "So I started to learn how to adapt classes for women like me and began aerial lessons specifically for them."

Circus clubs such as Madison Area Jugglers and Hoop/Flow Jam, a get-together of local hula hoop artists, eventually relocated to Madison Circus Space and Marcia Miquelon, another Wild Rumpus Circus performer and teacher, began offering after-school programs at the space.

"There's now a strong and definitely interwoven community of circus artists here in Madison," says Miquelon. "I think that the longevity of Cycropia and the Wild Rumpus Circus have also had a lot to do with that."

In late 2016 Accipiter Properties decided to do a remodel of the garage the circus space called home. But instead of pushing the nonprofit out, the developers sold them part of the property and asked them to stay.

"A lot of redevelopment happens at the expense of creative folks," says Accipiter's Chern. "John and I didn't have the idea that we were going to build spaces for artists, but as we came to know the people for four or five years before the redevelopment and saw the things they were doing with the community, we wanted to see if we could do it in a way that didn't boot them out."

Madison Circus Space will also be sharing a backyard on this multi-purpose property with CohoMadison (formerly known as Union Corners Cohousing), an affordable, LGBTQ+ and senior friendly housing project that partnered with Accipiter shortly after the plans to expand MCS were underway. Winnebago Studios was demolished to make room for the new housing and a bigger, better circus space.

“When we met with Adam and John to talk about cohousing, they told us the project would be dependent on the Circus Space moving forward,” says Greg Rosenberg, CohoMadison’s project manager. “If the circus project didn’t move forward, we wouldn’t have had a project. But when I brought the plan to the cohousing group, they went for it really fast.”

TONA WILLIAMS



“You can see the impact this art form has on people,” says juggler Josh Casey, who performed at the groundbreaking ceremony shared with CohoMadison.

The two new neighbors, CohoMadison and Madison Circus Space, even shared a groundbreaking celebration last summer.

“We had aerialists and juggling and flames and German wheel and stilt walkers. It was magical,” says Rosenberg. “It just made our cohousing project that much more compelling and interesting. I mean, who doesn’t want to live with artists and circus people?”

Rosenberg says he hopes residents of CohoMadison will participate in Feen’s senior-focused classes. “It’s a very Madison thing to have happen,” adds Casey. “You can see the impact this art form has on people. It lights them up.”

To purchase and renovate its home, which is twice the size of its previous space, Madison Circus Space needed to raise \$1 million. Schuna began a capital campaign to raise the funds, and **Stephanie Richards**, an aerialist, instructor and director of development for the space, took the reins.

“I’ve always been an extroverted person and I love making community connections,” says Richards. “My mind and my heart just want people to know each other, so when we launched this capital campaign I was dying to help out.”

Richards helped land a \$50,000 challenge grant from the Madison Community Foundation and a \$900 grant from the Circus Fans Association of America. Local philanthropist Diane Ballweg donated \$60,000 for show bleachers and mural art. And American Family Children's Hospital is relocating a larger-than-life sculpture of a tightwire unicyclist.

In total, Richards has helped raise \$113,000 in grants for the space, and the capital campaign has now reached \$872,000. But Richards says the most inspiring part of the job has been getting to know people like 95-year-old Lew Harned, whom she met while giving a presentation about the Circus Space at a Downtown Madison Rotary Club lunch. Lew helped set up circus tents in Tenney Park for traveling circuses in 1948. His wife was a trapeze flyer and he was her catcher.

“He told me about watching the trains come in with the circus when he was a kid,” says Richards. “I never felt so connected to circus history as in that moment.”

In May, Madison Circus Space began partnering with Operation Fresh Start, a nonprofit that mentors young adults and trains them to work in fields like construction and conservation. Operation Fresh Start has been helping to construct the Circus Space's new dance studios, lobby and interior build-outs.

VICTORIA DAVIS



“My mind and my heart just want people to know each other,” says aerialist Stephanie Richards, Madison Circus Space's director of development.

“Whenever we build something, the young people we work with are typically not seen by the community as the high-flyers, no pun intended,” says Gregory Markle, executive director of Operation Fresh Start. “But to let the community know that young people who may have had some trouble can still do incredible things, like build this place, is pretty impressive.”

Chern, who visits the new location to check on building progress, says the space “looks like a cathedral.” With the high-vaulted ceilings, bright colors, and influx of natural light pouring in from high windows, it's easy to see why.

Now that the cathedral is almost finished, Schuna, Richards and Casey have big plans for the facility. The nonprofit is seeking new teachers for activities like teeter board, Chinese pole, swinging trapeze, hoop diving, Russian bar, hand balancing, and other circus arts it has not been able to accommodate in past spaces. Schuna said she's already gotten emails from instructors from as far away as Portugal, the U.K. and Switzerland.

The added square footage will ensure for a happy circus community. "We love each other, but I am looking forward to more separation and being able to observe other classes through windows without having to worry about things hitting you in the head," says Dunn. "When you've got a hoop dance class going on while there's three people German wheeling and then there's some acro people doing their thing and juggling clubs flying above your head while I'm trying to teach classes, it's just chaos."

The space is also working to attract more touring shows. In October, it will host [Open Ring Circus](#) and is hoping to book Seattle-based contemporary circus artists [Ariel Schmitdke](#) and [Esther de Monteflores](#) in the spring.

"We have various business models for events," says Richards. "Groups can propose ticket splits or simply rent space. We want to make sure artists are paid, and that we support the success of their show while also remaining financial sustainable."

Schuna, who recently traveled to German wheel competitions in Chicago and Italy, says she is looking forward to showing off her moves in November's Cirque du Sylvee, Madison Circus Space's first gala in more than three years.

"It's so refreshing to see people doing these weird, crazy, wild and creative things," says Schuna, who believes circus is a timeless art form. "I find more reward in entertaining an audience and pursuing the creative side than I do in competing."

"We're focused on making circus accessible to everyone and letting members and students define what circus means to them," adds Richards. "What stories can we tell and what feelings can we invoke? That's the beauty of circus."

There's also a beauty in being rooted. "We opened the doors six years ago not really knowing where it was going to lead," says Casey. "The only reason we're able to exist at all is people from all over the city feeling really strongly about dedicating time in the way that they can to help this organization run. There's a huge swath of the community who could benefit from circus arts. We just want to keep spreading that love around."

[Editor's note: We incorrectly identified the aerial silks artist in a photo of a performer with Venardos Circus. She is Ilenay Peña Vives, not Laura Gwendolyn Burch, who was out due to an injury during the Madison stop.]

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