

Local circus performers walk the tightrope

San Diego Circus Center and Sophia Isadora Academy do it for the love of the craft

by [Victoria Davis](#)



Walking into the San Diego Circus Center is like entering the gym of an Olympic gymnastics team, except way more interesting. Hidden away in an industrial area of Middletown, the 10,000-square-foot practice space is almost always bustling with activity.

On this day, performer Shayna Rutledge works on her contortionism exercises. Elevated gracefully on a wooden box, she bends her legs above her back and toward her head like a scorpion. In another area, Liz Overton practices Russian bar, which requires her to be put into a harness and anchored to a 27-foot-high ceiling. Once she's strapped in, she performs frontward and backward flips on two pole vaults. A crowd has started to accumulate in front of the open warehouse space as people watch the performers train on the aerial silks, trampoline and CYR Wheel.

Though the travelling circus has been a popular form of entertainment for centuries, rarely has it ever been considered a serious career. In a time where working in the circus is considered passé and once popular circuses like Ringling Bros have gone out of business due to animal rights protests, there's still a small community that is passionate about the art form. These highly talented and highly trained individuals have chosen to devote their life to something that not only challenges them as artists, but serves to bring others joy.

For Circus Center founder Jean-Luc Martin, his passion for the circus began in 1986 when, at age 19, he saw Cirque Du Soleil for the first time.

"I fell in love with it just like everybody else does," said Martin.



Keen on the idea of becoming a circus performer, the enthusiastic Martin found a home at the Pickle Family Circus in San Francisco. He performed with them for two years then went back to his hometown of Montreal to train at the circus school, Ecole Nationale De Cirque. After that, Cirque Du Soleil picked Martin up, where he worked for ten years.

Eventually, though, Martin wanted a change. He travelled the world working as a stuntman, film producer and an actor. But after 10 years of being away, he found he longed for what he had left behind.

“Circus kept pulling back at me,” said Martin who, at that point, was well regarded within the circus community. “No matter what city I was in, people would ask me to help them on their skills, whether it be handstands, tumbling or Russian bar.”

Martin found he had a love for teaching circus and desired to start a facility in the U.S. that was as recognized as the European schools and respected by professional troupes. Martin first opened the center in Miramar in 2012 but in the last year moved it right next to the San Diego Airport. People come from all over the world to train for months at a time, including German and French performers. Martin admits that there was a time that he believed there was no future for the circus. Now, the center he started is one of five circus schools in the U.S. recognized by higher education schools around the world.

“Economically, what I am doing here doesn’t make sense,” said Martin. “I have three other jobs to make ends meet. But this is where my heart is. Plus, why not? Why not take that challenge and make it work?”

Across town, Cheryl Lindley has similar feelings when it comes to the circus. Wanting to find a way to blend her passion for art, athletics, thrills and storytelling into one career, the San Diego native looked to the circus. She began as the star clown at Cirque Viaggio and went on to perform with the

local Fern Street circus troupe. Having performed as a dancer, mime, clown and acrobat, Lindley founded the Lindley Circus with her children and husband in 2006.

But Lindley's heart lies with her students at the Sophia Isadora Academy of Circus, which she founded twelve years ago in 2006 and named after her daughter, Sophia, a performer and circus teacher who died in a car accident. While Jean-Luc's Circus Center is more modern, the Academy focuses on a "family-style teaching method." While the academy is not recognized as a school for higher circus education, Lindley trains her students hard, saying, "I treat them like little professionals" and she's very honest with students wanting to pursue a professional career.

"First, I try to talk them out of it," said Lindley. "It's a tough life. There's limited opportunities, but I've made a great living. So if that's where their heart is, if that's where their passion and creativity lies, I'll do anything I can to help them get there."

Even one of Lindley's own students and trainers, Hanna Denham, a hand-balancing contortionist who has been at the academy for seven years, works two other jobs outside of training.

"It's funny, I feel like circus performers never talk about their other jobs, because this, circus, is what I solely do, completely," said Denham. "I've been able to prove so much to myself going through these skills and it really translates into life as well."

Another unique quality about the circus that dance and theater often lack is the special relationship between the performers and audience members. For Rutledge, the 20-year-old contortionist performer from Minnesota who trains at the Center, that connection is very important.



“There’s something amazing about picking out a couple people in the audience, even if you don’t know them, and performing for them,” said Rutledge. “That’s *really* special.”

So while they might train as athletes, Rutledge and other circus performers all do it to inspire the people who watch. Nothing is ever guaranteed for a performer, but they still do it to better themselves, express themselves and to show audiences something magnificent. Even after all these centuries, it’s the circus’ authenticity that makes it desirable.

Back at the Center, Martin says his desire will always be there and, sprinkled within the hardships, there are moments within that life that make it all worthwhile.

“The memorable moments are the ones that make you sweat. The ones that make you scared. As performers, we learn to rise to those occasions and better ourselves. And that’s what I missed when I left. It’s what pulled me back in.”