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Summary Overview of “Northland Stars”: A Community Circus Programme

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Executive Summary

This report presents a summary overview of the Northland Stars Community Circus Programme. This programme began in 2008 and provides a regular forum for those with circus skills across Northland to develop these skills, teach others what they know and build friendships. Participants come together for a three to four hour session to improve their circus skills. The programme has run on a monthly basis and at other times less often, depending on the availability of resources and people to run the programme.

Northland Stars grew out of the development of Circus Kumarani in 2003 in Dargaville, plus the emergence of hubs of circus activity around Northland in Waipu, Whangarei, Kaitia and Kaikohe. Northland Stars targets people who already have circus skills and tends to attract young people who are circus 'high achievers', who wish to refine and share the skills they have with others.

In April 2012, face to face interviews took place with people involved with Northland Stars, including the Circus Kumarani Project Manager and 12 participants at an April 2012 workshop, as to what they gain from being involved in the programme. Short profiles are also provided of two people who have been part of Northland Stars since its early days.

Northland Stars helps to strengthen the circus community in Northland and produces a host of benefits for participants, including better circus skills, increased confidence and self esteem, friendships, fitness, motor skills and improved concentration. Participants' world views are also reportedly broadened through exposure to national and international travellers with circus skills who frequently join in Northland Stars, as both teachers and participants.

Programmes such as Northland Stars require resourcing to fund teachers, equipment and transport for people to access the workshops. They also need to keep bringing in circus teachers with new and higher level skills to keep challenging participants. At times the participants' skill levels surpass the teachers – in these cases the students become the teachers.

This summary overview found that Northland Stars' participants value the programme as it helps them improve their circus skills, is fun and builds a community of people with a common interest. They also gain skills that are transferable to other aspects of their life, including self-discipline, social and communication skills, team work, flexibility and perseverance. Key perceived needs for the programme were more specialised equipment, more regular workshops, a purpose built space and growing the community by attracting more people to the programme.

Where pockets of circus activity exist in a region there is value in a programme such as this to connect the circus community and support 'higher achievers' to develop and share their skills. This kind of programme can lead to employment and income generation for participants and teachers, and can result in the creation of public circus performances and the development of circus programmes for the community. It can also provide a pool of future circus teachers and nurture skilled amateur and professional circus performers.

Overall, Northland Stars provides an important vehicle for the fostering of circus talent in the Northland region. It also provides a positive option for young people in the region in particular, to connect, learn, develop and share skills.



Introduction

This report presents a summary overview of a Northland based community circus programme called Northland Stars. It provides a description of this programme and a small scale assessment of its impact and benefits.

This overview was funded by the Lotteries Community Sector Research Fund, as part of a wider project aiming to support the development of community circus in New Zealand. This research project is a partnership involving the staff and Board of Circus Kumarani in Dargaville and researchers' Rachael Trotman and Alex Woodley, with input from Thomas Hinz and Frances Kelliher from Auckland Community Circus¹.

Background

Community circus has had a presence in Dargaville via Circus Kumarani since 2003. Hubs of community circus activity have also emerged around the Northland region during this time, including circus activity in Whangarei, Waipu, Kaitaia and Kaikohe.

Community circus involves teaching circus skills to individuals and groups of people, for their benefit and for wider community benefit. Over time some of those involved in community circus in Northland have become 'hooked' on one or a range of circus activities (such as juggling or unicycling). Many of these people wish to develop their skills and spend time with like-minded people. In response, the Northland Stars community circus programme began in 2008, out of a desire to help circus teachers and students to develop and share their circus skills.

Objectives of Northland Stars

The objectives of the Northland Stars community circus programme are to:

- Provide a means for people to improve their circus skills and teach others what they know.
- Provide access to national and international people with circus skills to offer others.
- Support the development of a network of circus enthusiasts and create a lasting community.
- Produce a range of benefits for the individuals involved.

¹ See the Circus Kumarani www.circuskumarani.co.nz and Auckland Community Circus www.communitycircus.co.nz websites for research findings to date. These relate to a literature review on community circus (2012), an online survey of the New Zealand community circus sector (2011) and an evaluation of an Auckland based community circus programme called 'Circolina's Leap' (2012).

- Keep people with the 'best' circus skills motivated and feed that energy and skill back to the wider community.
- Prepare a career path for high circus achievers through teaching and/or performing.
- To provide a different regular focus on 'the best' for different circus skills (unicycle, juggling etc), including people with disabilities.
- Create shows fostering high skill levels to promote community circus to the wider public.
- Produce benefits for the wider community.

Objectives of this summary overview

The purpose of this summary overview is to describe the Northland Stars programme and identify what participants of the programme gain from it. Specific objectives are to present:

1. A brief story of this programme.
2. Perceived benefits and impacts of the programme for those involved.
3. Lessons for this programme going forward and for future similar projects.

Methods

Method	Description
1. Key informant interview	A face to face interview was held with the Circus Kumarani Project Manager Jenny Huriwai.
2. Short interviews with participants	Short face to face interviews took place with 12 participants at a Northland Stars workshop on 28 April, 2012. People were asked how they came to take part, what they personally have gained from the programme, what they like best and how it could be improved.
3. Two impact profiles	A more in-depth, follow up interview was held with two participants from the workshop above (one face to face and one by phone), to gain more detail on how the programme had impacted on them. Both of these people have been involved with Northland Stars since its early days. A short discussion of the impact of the programme on these people was also held with the mother of one of the participants and the grandmother of the other participant.

Feedback from individuals was collected by the author.

Findings

The findings begin by describing the Northland Stars programme, followed by the findings from the interviews and impact profiles, a discussion and conclusion.

The Northland Stars Programme

The Northland Stars programme involves regular provision of a three to four hour circus skills session. Participants are charged \$10 per session, to cover the cost of venue hire and visiting teachers. At times Northland Stars has been held monthly and at other times less frequently, depending on the availability of people to organise and run the programme. It is usually held in Whangarei but moves around the Northland region (including Dargaville, Kaikohe and Waipu).

Each Northland Stars session is advertised via existing circus teachers who invite people in their groups to attend. A file is also kept of participants who are invited to each session and this provides an expanding invitation list. The programme is set up for Northland Star members, who are the people with the highest circus skill levels from each area, plus the teachers of the Northland circus groups. As the name implies, the people in the programme tend to be high achievers in circus skills – those who have developed strong circus skills over time.

The aim is to have a focused training or rehearsal session in a long term, team building environment. This is usually combined with a two hour circus teacher meeting in the morning before the afternoon Northland Stars session.

The programme focuses on different circus skills in each session depending on the circus teachers available and their key skills. For example, one programme might focus on unicycling, another on juggling, another on acrobatics. Participants are also asked what they would like to focus on and sessions can cover up to three disciplines.

The programme targets those who have circus skills already. Typically, circus teachers from around Northland run each session. When people with circus skills to offer from around New Zealand and internationally are available, they are brought in to share their skills with others via the Northland Stars programme.

In recent times, mainly through the influence of two current Circus Kumarani teachers who are from France, there has been significant input from international teachers and performers to Northland Stars. This increases the attraction for Northland Stars participants and spreads the word about the Northland Stars programme and circus in New Zealand via these travellers, both within New Zealand and internationally.

From time to time public shows are created out of Northland Stars, and late in 2011 one session was devoted to the development of performance skills. The first public Northland Stars circus show was performed in Dargaville as part of the Circus Kumarani

"Circus Infusion" show. This was followed by a performance as part of the Northland Fire Show.

Interviews with participants and key informants

At the Northland Stars session on 28 April at Pompallier College, Whangarei, short face to face interviews were held with 12 participants during the workshop session. Each person was asked how they got involved with Northland Stars, what they like about it, what the programme has done for them and how it could be improved.

How did you come to be involved in Northland Stars?

The main vehicles that people became involved in Northland Stars were:

- Through friends who were already involved
- Through being involved with Circus Kumarani, or with circus in Whangarei (Whangarei Circus or the weekly Circus Jam at Kamo High School) or Waipu (through a local circus teacher or his newsletter) or Pompallier College.

What do you like about Northland Stars?

"My son has learnt lots of circus skills and is now teaching other kids. He has the latest equipment and spent his birthday money on juggling gear".

The main things people liked about Northland Stars are as follows.

- Learning and sharing new skills - "I pick up new skills and tricks and teach others what I know. It's good to get everyone together to do circus things rather than on your own"
- Developing existing skills - "Developing my skills - I like the one on one approach, there are a lot of experienced people here"
- It's fun
- It's unusual
- Making new friends, the social side, the people are really nice - "This has formed a nice community, involves unique skills – it's nice to have something unique about you"; "I like how everyone here is into it, we all want the same things, to learn, get better and have a good time"
- It provides a positive activity for young people – "This group keeps kids off the streets, it's a great crowd, people are always there for each other, people make friends and stay in touch"
- Wider community connections are made – "I get to connect with the other parents, I went to both the Auckland circus conventions and to Levin last year (for a circus convention)...I am now learning balloon sculpting!"
- Good teachers – "The teachers (Mat and Jo) are encouraging, energetic and positive, it's nice to be around them, good to learn with them, they have a good style"

- Exposure to different teachers and skills – “One person can only teach you so much, Northland Stars exposes you to other teachers and people here teach others”.

What have you personally gained from the programme?

The main things people gained through their involvement were learning and developing new skills, making friends, improving concentration and learning about performing.

- Learning new skills - “I like learning new skills and meeting people, getting better at stuff”
- Developing my skills - “I like developing my skills and progressing, seeing what I can work on and do better”
- Making friends, something to do - “I have made some friends and met so many people I wouldn’t have otherwise met”; “I have made quite a few friends through this, it keeps me busy, is something to do”
- I like performing and the opportunities that arise through circus
- I use juggling to earn some money, I wouldn’t use it as a main job but it provides a side income
- Improved learning and marks at school – “Juggling has really affected my school work for the better, my marks have improved, I got first for physics and chemistry and second for biology and maths and that is related to my juggling and how it improves my concentration - I now do some teaching of juggling in my school to help others concentrate”.

How could the programme be improved?

Key perceived needs were to attract more people, have more specialised equipment, more appropriate venues and more regular workshops.

- Circus resources are a bit limited in Whangarei, there are more resources in Dargaville and Auckland – we need more specialised equipment such as Cyr wheels²
- It would be good to have these workshops more often
- It would be good to have specialised workshops for people with higher level skills
- Would like to get a purpose built space with a high roof, it can get cramped in other venues

² A Cyr wheel is a single large, metal hoop that a person stands inside and uses to roll around a room. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qDg9Cr_GJA for a demonstration by Cirque du Soleil.

- Bring more people in, it tends to be the same people coming every time - it would be good to have more people, grow the community
- It would be good to have circus holiday programmes in more places than Dargaville.



Profiles

The following provides two profiles of regular Northland Star participants, both of whom have been longer term participants and who have gone on to achieve success in unicycling.

Daniel Wade - 16

"I have been going to Northland Stars since it started. Circus was set up in Dargaville, Northland and Waipu. The point of Northland Stars is to get the top people from these areas along to learn new skills. Northland Stars is not for beginners but it is open to everyone.

The Northland Stars workshops are one on one – you get more time with the teacher. Travellers also pitch in and pass on their skills – this year the programme is getting more professional; if people want particular skills taught then they can be brought in.

I have met a lot of people through the workshops from Whangarei and Waipu and made new friends that I connect with outside of the workshops. I have learnt lots of new skills.

I would like to do unicycling for a living but I don't know how. I love the people you meet through unicycling the most, you can post stuff up on the internet and meet people through events and through Facebook there is a unicycling forum, you make global connections. New tricks are being invented all the time.

I have got more confidence through doing circus, through doing shows, plus the confidence to say we do this kind of stuff [circus]. It takes confidence to say "I do those things" and to be proud of it. Mum and my teachers have noticed that I have got better at school from doing circus."

For Daniel's mum Jeanette, the best thing about Northland Stars is people getting together – the passionate and committed circus people. They also have access through the programme to travellers and people with good circus expertise. Jeanette has witnessed 'incredible personal growth' through circus for Daniel, in terms of camaraderie and connection, and being part of a community: "It's a way for Daniel to step up and pass on what he knows to others".

Daniel won the long jump and high jump at the Northland Regional Unicycling championships in 2011.

Sam La Hood – 16

"I have been doing Northland Stars for three years. I went to a circus festival in Dargaville, learnt to unicycle and do a bit of juggling. Through unicycling I met Jenny's son Christian Huriwai [who is the 2010 and 2012 male world street unicycling champion, based in Kaikohe], he inspired me. Unicycling is just fun to do, there is so much you can do with it. Unicycling is my life now, it's healthy for me, keeps me fit, I have met lots of people through it and am going to Italy to the world unicycling champs in July. This is my big passion in life now, it's what I'm known by.

I will help teach the unicycle in Northland Stars, the rest of what they do in Northland Stars helps me improve my skills. I am learning how to teach unicycle through Northland Stars. The challenge of unicycling and circus keeps me going – seeing how far I can go."

Sam's grandmother Gaynor notes that circus played a big part in Sam coming to live in Dargaville several years ago. Gaynor notes that even at age 11, Sam earned her own \$400 to pay the circus fee for the year to Circus Kumarani and she has done that for the last three years.

"Circus has been wonderful for Sam, it has made her responsible, she has paid her own way by delivering papers at 4.30am. Sam can now relate to anybody and is doing her school work by correspondence to suit her unicycling training. Unicycling is not NZQA¹ supported so Sam wrote to NZQA asking for credits to be approved. Sam is doing PE and English at school and doing the rest by correspondence so that she can do her unicycling training during the day. Sam is very focused and Northland Stars is a natural extension for her. Unicycling has built her confidence and given her a focus and outlet for her talents." See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ytiVZ3Lllo> for a clip of Sam riding unicycle.

Note that Sam La Hood won the Female World Champion title for street unicycling in Italy in July 2012. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbnTmpuMpWA> for a clip of Dargaville based Sam. Two Kaikohe locals Christian Huriwai (20) who won the men's title and 13 year old Samuel Tzikoucos who took third place in the world in his age group. The clip shows a street parade held in Kaikohe for the three when they returned victorious from the world street unicycling champs. More than 1500 riders from 35 countries took part in the world championships.

Discussion

The Northland Stars programme provides a valued forum for circus enthusiasts to develop their existing skills, learn new skills, make friends, teach others what they know and be part of a community of people with a common interest. At times those with a strong passion for a circus skill such as unicycling or juggling outstrip the abilities of their teachers and become the teacher themselves.

As well as making friends and developing skills, participants in Northland Stars can learn how to teach others, improve their concentration and school work, build confidence and self-esteem.

A challenge is to keep increasing the skill level by bringing in people who can extend the participants, including travellers and people from other parts of New Zealand. Finding the resources to keep the classes regular can also be a challenge.

The lessons emerging from the Northland Stars programme are as follows.

- There is value in providing a forum for those in a region to meet and develop and share their circus skills. It provides a way for like-minded people to meet, build friendships, skills and confidence, share what they know and push their own boundaries.
- This kind of programme needs to be supported by good promotion and support to access the sessions (for example a bus to bring those with no transport).
- The venue can be moved around the region to support access.
- The venue needs to be appropriate for the activity (high ceilings and plenty of space).
- A challenge is to ensure that the skill level keeps being pushed, by bringing in new people to extend those taking part. One way to do this is to attract overseas visitors with circus skills, via social media.
- The skills of some participants can outstrip those of the teachers – in which case all support should be given to help those people to teach others.
- The Northland Stars experience shows that programmes such as these can help to create world champions - or at least provide an outlet for those with a passion in circus skills to see what they are capable of.

Conclusion

The Northland Stars programme is part of a larger community circus story in Northland over the last ten years. This programme grew out of the creation of Circus Kumarani in Dargaville in 2003, plus other circus hubs in Whangarei, Waipu, Kaitaia and Kaikohe. It provides a valuable forum for members of the circus community in Northland to gather and develop their skills.

From this programme friendships and confidence develop and opportunities emerge for participants to perform in front of others, teach others and take their skills to new heights. Programmes such as these depend on the often voluntary input of a small group of people, and can lead those involved in all kinds of exciting directions. They also depend on good communication and a network of people involved in circus and supporting community circus in a region, who can work together to promote the programme, get people to it and make sure the skill levels are always being stretched.