

# **Cirque Hors Piste presents its Collective Creations Final Report Social circus and pre-employability in 4 acts**

## **ACT 1 - Cirque Hors Piste: Social Circus in a Church!**

Since 2017, in fact, CHP has spearheaded its work from its base in the former Sainte-Brigide de Kildare church and presbytery, which it rents, in the hope of acquiring a permanent space in the Îlot Sainte-Brigide. Îlot Sainte-Brigide comprises the former Sainte-Brigide church (1878), sacristy, presbytery and parking lot, in Montreal's Centre-Sud neighbourhood. The development of the "Îlot Sainte-Brigide" project is being coordinated by the Centre culturel et communautaire Sainte-Brigide (CCCSB). The project is predicated on the idea of bringing together several partners – social and cultural organizations – who wish to offer a range of services to the local and regional population and to create synergies by sharing premises. As the site has been bequeathed by the Sainte-Brigide-de-Kildare parish, the main goal of the project is to oversee its vocation as a community space.

CHP has been working on the project since 2011, but nothing has yet been confirmed... Several administrative steps have yet to be taken before the organization can officially hang up its shingle. Ironically, the current situation places the CHP, like several of the young people it serves, in precarious residential circumstances... However, our interest in the space is self-explanatory. It is centrally located, easily accessible for our young CC candidates, and close to several partner organizations and collaborators with whom CHP works. The nave of the former church presents innumerable possibilities for circus-related activities, making it possible for us to install equipment on a permanent basis, like the trapeze, in a safe environment that can be adapted as required.

## **What is social circus?**

Although the two elements in "social circus" – "social" and "circus" – might seem a bit simplistic, their association is in fact highly suggestive. From the outset, social circus can be defined by its mode of social intervention, i.e. employing the circus arts as its main tool to foster the personal development of those living with various challenges, be they psychological, physiological or social (Caravan, 2010). For others, it is "an art at the intersection of circus, community outreach and popular education" (Gravel-Richard, 2008). Circus is a social product. A journey back in time reminds us that the Middle Ages saw troops of street performers, often entire families, forging the sole social links between isolated villages (Dagenais et al., 1999). Added to the marginal and itinerant lifestyles of these troops, it is easy to make connections between community, circus and vulnerable populations. One thing is certain: the circus arts have always whet a certain appetite, which has only grown considerably in recent decades.

Although circus is social by definition, it still remains difficult to determine its origins historically, possibly due to its ever-changing nature. After all, it is not a single concept that can be attributed to one theorist, one country or one city! Since circus is always of its time, the advent of social movements – alterglobalist, ecological, feminist, community-based, citizen-based – is reflected in the emergence of “new circus” or “contemporary circus.” This new wave eschews performing animals to embrace new aesthetics: poetic, to encourage dreaming; absurd, to hold up a mirror to the human condition; anti-establishment, to address citizens in revolt. All this is done in order to invoke, provoke and evoke the imaginations, the minds and the hearts of an increasingly large – or increasingly select – audience (Monteil, n.d.; Rivard, 2007). Albeit with humour, several practitioners still incorporate the circle and its symbolism associated with the community and the egalitarian society (Monteil, n.d.), and even a circular pedagogy (Rivard, 2007). At the same time, the transmission of the circus arts’ oral tradition to the written word, undertaken by passionate professionals and researchers, will quickly spread the word about social circus in all its guises, in all corners of the world, from the biggest cities to the smallest villages. From this point on, it will be funded, and, in many cases, it will be adopted as an intervention tool among audiences as varied in age as in gender, or in the range of issues encountered.

In close proximity, the program Cirque du Monde (CdM), a social arm of Cirque du Soleil –also established in the aftermath of the international Convention on the Rights of the Child (Rivard, 2004) – had an immense influence on the growth of social circus, not only in North America, but also in the four corners of the globe. In fact, over the years, CdM has developed pedagogical tools to help advance social circus, above and beyond its own big top.

**In terms of intervention**, more specifically among homeless and marginalized youth, some movement has occurred since the end of the last century, giving way to the emergence of a **new school of thought**, not only on a theoretical level, but also in the field (Invernizzi, 2000; Rivard, 2004). It is universally acknowledged that the dominant line of thinking still relies heavily on repression and protectionism, but this emergent thinking sheds light on ways to provide youth with care, guidance, even support (Ennew and Swart-Kruger, 2003; Panter-Brick, 2003; Rivard, 2008; Sauv , 2003; Thomas de Benitez, 2003). Invited to consider youth as players in their communities, they were asked to be open to seeing their children in a new way. Since then, a number of models have been implemented featuring a rationale that takes youth into account, rather than just taking over; this includes the notion of economic integration. Among these models, some rely on the intervention of peers, while others favour art and creativity as a means of reaching them, but all recognize their experiential know-how, potential and interests.

Social circus is borne by **founding principles** and **values** that are likely measures of its continuity and the love it inspires in those who encounter it. First, it is founded on the paradigm of “thinking differently”: “Thinking differently not only about solutions, but also about problems and the [people] who must face these problems, but then also rethinking intervention practices” (Rivard, 2007: 61). The circus tool – multidisciplinary, original, generative – becomes

a means to reach youth as well as many of the other most inaccessible populations, those that do not get up and move or that no longer know how to laugh.

In concrete terms, the circus tool is exploited for its **socio-symbolic values** that are also affinities with the most vulnerable populations. Think of street art, homelessness, community living, family living; think of its universality, which surpasses cultural and linguistic barriers, of the risks and challenges circus presents, but also of the play and pleasure it elicits (Bolton, 2004). Imbued with a strong **pedagogy**, called “alternative” (Hotier, 2003; Rivard, 2007), social circus is easily combined with emancipatory **approaches**, similar to the theories of popular education, that stimulate participants’ sense of freedom, self-esteem, awareness, care for oneself and others, confidence and autonomy (Gilles, 2003; Rivard, 2007). However, circus also provides a more prescriptive **framework**, in terms of safety, discipline, equity and respect. It is true that these rules are restrictive, as we will see further on.

In just a few hours, or even just a few days, participants can maintain their balance on the rola-bola, join in building a pyramid or even juggling with three scarves. However, it is important to remember that **acquiring circus skills** is not the goal but rather the means to an end, i.e. the acquisition of personal, group and relational skills necessary for personal development and a positive and productive re-entry into the community (Lafortune et al., 2011). Participants are not pushed and are not required to relinquish their beliefs, nor to abandon their marginalized identity (Spiegel, 2016). It is enough for them to show up, to enjoy the experience and to contribute to a circus show in their own way. As you might well imagine, all of this provides numerous possible pathways towards the Other, which has a value in and of itself! For Spiegel, the impact of social circus operates on three levels: personal development; social inclusion and community involvement (Spiegel, 2014; 2016). These three levels are ways that participants can (re)establish their place in society and create new types of civil engagement that are meaningful for them.

It is definitely the **final show** – the high point of the experience, an opening up to the rest of the world, and irrefutable proof that something is in process – that best illustrates this newly created relationship with the Other. First, by working alongside team members, young participants develop a sense of belonging and invest themselves tirelessly, all the while imbued with confidence tempered by an awareness of the risk involved. Then, all the possibilities imaginable reflected in the admiring gaze of the crowd.

In most cases, social circus is also about the importance of working in **partnership**, often with organizations already interacting with youth, in order to ensure consistency in the services offered on an individual basis, not to mention the bearers of the spirit of social circus, the **tandem** of community worker and **circus instructor** who, with their ideas, openness, listening skills and patience, generate change, whatever it may be!

In short, most of these dimensions can be found, unsurprisingly, in the social circus training manual, published by Cirque du Soleil (2013), that offers seven principles to underpin the social circus framework:

- *the creation of a safe, fun space;*
- *links with the community;*
- *expression, creation and performance;*
- *collaboration between social intervention and circus;*
- *duration over time, continuity;*
- *a participant-centred process; and*
- *partnerships.*

And last but not least, circus is based on theories of the **human body** – a learning instrument – by the physical demands it makes, to “emerge from the fixed body.” All of the parts of the body are involved, solo, in twos, jumping, stretching, making faces or even in a sitting position! This type of work is progressive and disciplined, undertaken with the acceptance of one’s own body and the reality of publically presenting it in the show. In conclusion, this circus, social in its very nature, supported by its players, is simultaneously deployed among its young participants and in the community. This political gesture, forger of ties, puts art at the service of social change (Spiegel, 2017) by providing a space for transformation, able to reconcile ideas as diametrically opposed as the margin and the norm, the personal and the universal, the prescriptive and the emancipatory. It lives in that liminal space between the fabulous and the real (Rivard, 2007).

## **CIRQUE HORS PISTE and its strands of activities**

CHP is a **social circus organization** that provides an alternative and inclusive space where marginalized youth can be creative. The organization promotes individual and group learning through the circus arts. CHP is proud to have its roots in Montreal, a city: known as a circus arts capital and a continual source of energy and inspiration. A leader in social circus in Quebec and Canada, CHP is recognized as a major ambassador of the community arts movement.

Incorporated as a **non-profit organization** on August 25, 2011, CHP has relied on the solid expertise and an unprecedented partnership with Cirque du Soleil since 1995, under the name “Cirque du Monde Montréal” [World Circus Montréal], one of the many international sites of the Cirque du Monde (CdM) outreach program. Championing collaboration for over two decades, CHP has based its outreach activities on inter-organizational partnerships and is constantly pursuing new collaborative relationships. Its most loyal collaborators include CACTUS Montréal, En Marge 12-17, Plein Milieu and Dans la rue. The process of empowerment enables CHP to share its expertise in social circus and its collaborative working methods even more broadly, as well as to develop new youth outreach initiatives.

CHP has set itself apart by its **pedagogical approach**, which links artistic expression with social intervention. With this aim in mind, the organization enlists circus artists who wish to use their talents in a community context, as well as community workers interested in incorporating circus arts into their intervention work. CHP provides its participants with individual guidance, creating an opportunity for a positive experience that will foster self-esteem and a pride in oneself.

By clearly defining its founding principles, this circus organization has been able to define and consolidate its values, choices and initiatives. Broadly speaking, these three founding principles are the following: the place of youth; community outreach; and the contribution of circus.

**Marginalized youth** – those who are homeless or at risk – are treated as full citizens in their own right, as CHP is firmly convinced that anything is possible when the creative process starts with their resourcefulness, their potential and their life experience. With its astounding participants, CHP knows that it will be helping to forge links with the community and fostering a new way of looking at marginalized youth, thereby promoting possible social – even financial – integration. On the strength of its pedagogically powerful **circus intervention tool** (Hotier, 2003, Rivard, 2007), CHP enables young Montrealers to use their marginalized position as a starting point in order to establish new relationships in a society that has often rejected them. Providing the space for freedom and creativity while demanding tenacity, perseverance and discipline, the circus arts permit those at risk to express themselves and to come out of their shells, while inviting them to grow both socially and physically.

Among the values promoted by the organization, five are highlighted in its official documents:

*Creativity* – Opening up new possibilities by providing the space for self-expression, dreaming and the imagination

*Safety* – Creating a safe space suitable for experimentation and risk taking that safeguards physical and psychological integrity

*Confidence* – Supporting and encouraging group participation and overseeing the development of social connections through activities

*Pleasure* – Making learning a pleasurable experience, inevitable but completely feasible given the range of circus activities, physical and theatre games, and the laughter that results

*Sense of belonging* – By creating a space that belongs to the participants, where they feel both free to be themselves and connected with others

Thus, through the circus arts, CHP offers youth at risk of being marginalized or excluded an alternate path to personal development, with artistic and social guidance that enables them to act and grow as citizens.

The organization's activities are carried out through four **main components**, which include the means to reach the most inaccessible youth, to provide them with a space where they can just "be" and express themselves physically and artistically, and to develop basic circus skills that may eventually contribute to their economic survival:

**Cirko-Vélo** – A team composed of a community worker and a circus instructor go off on bicycles to find the most isolated youth, forge connections with them and teach them a few circus skills, in order to build their overall sense of well-being. A frontline intervention among homeless youth, this program is also meant to encourage better co-habitation in neighbourhoods where tension exists between residents, businesses and marginalized populations.

**Regular workshops** – A place where youth receive a warm welcome, support and guidance on a weekly basis, offered through the circus arts by a team of community workers and circus instructors. Circus provides a pretext to encourage youth in their personal and social development, giving them a positive group experience, and more generally, improving their living conditions. This program also offers youth a chance to get a snack, to begin taking steps in their lives and to meet with a community worker individually.

**Creative services and Hors Piste event** – These services pair professional artists, emerging artists and at-risk youth to offer events, shows, circus workshops and team-building exercises to the public at large. This innovative program promotes the social integration of at-risk youth and gives them individualized guidance to help them determine their path in life.

At the same time, CHP has organized the Événement Hors Piste (EHP) [Outside/ Beyond the Ring Event], held during the summer festival Montréal Complètement Cirque, for the past eight years. In addition to providing young artists with the opportunity to perform in Montreal, EHP showcases the mobilization of those marginalized by getting them actively involved in the production of the event.

## **Collective Creations**

The subject of this report, these works created collectively are described in detail in Act 3.

## **ACT 2 - Methodology**

**The preferred approach**, essentially qualitative, is intended to be descriptive, evaluative, fundamentally participative and rooted in a comprehensive paradigm: the understanding of the experience and its effects (Dubet, 1994).

**The descriptive part** has as its aim the collection of information that makes it possible to put the CC model into words, to establish an operational framework, to state the steps of the

process – those that recur and those that vary – and to identify some ways of illustrating the dynamic that seeped into each CC.

**The evaluative part** is intended to articulate the activities of the CC model, to explain and make connections between the founding principles, values, preferred procedures and intentions that underpin the activities CHP recommends within the CC framework. It is also meant to underscore certain results or observable or quantifiable effects, for example in terms of the profiles of the various players involved or reached and the young participants' attendance at the activities. To do so, the research team first studied the tools of the existing data already collected and then suggested to the CC team members certain formulas that could supplement or replace those used previously, or even new tools, in order to collect basic as well as entirely new data.

- *Selection interview chart;*
- *General information chart;*
- *1<sup>st</sup> individual meeting chart*
- *One-month later meeting chart*

Another goal was to identify the skills – interpersonal, practical and social (Pierre, 2009) – as well as several key indicators of success related to pre-employability and employment in the literature, the mandate of the CC, and to confirm the presence or emergence of the young participants, and last but not least, to consider the CC mandate of pre-employability.

**The participatory aspect** encompasses the research process and CC activities. With the CC team, this aspect is intended to safeguard space for ongoing discussion and reflection, ideally incorporated into meetings set in the schedule. In the context of the CC workshops, given the intensity of the month-long experience, the research team favoured perfect attendance, ongoing and transparent discussions and a regular update on the observations made. After all, with the benefit of these reciprocal spaces incorporated into the CHP culture, the combination of the two approaches was intended to promote multifaceted reflection and a co-constructed analysis.

**The research process** was closely tied to the CC program, even before the activities began, which is to say from the initial team meetings, when the cycle of the next three collective creations was outlined. The first CC was held on the premises of the National Circus School, rented by CHP. The other two were held at Sainte-Brigide church.

All the activities related to the CC – direct and indirect, as well as the more informal – were subject to observation, either participatory or less actively involved, depending on the group and the instance. The **direct activities**, i.e. those that were directly linked to the CC, will be analyzed in Act 3. These consisted of participation in the circus workshops, individual and group meetings with the participants and team meetings for planning, assessment or reflection.

Concretely speaking, **being a circus researcher** meant bringing one's lunch to eat with the CC team while they planned the workshop, dressing in work-out clothes, warming up with the group, playing games intended to develop all kinds of skills – basically, contributing to the spirit of the group! Depending on the group numbers or level of difficulty of the techniques being taught, it sometimes meant spotting a pair as they completed a hand-to-hand exercise, replacing a late or absent participant, lending a hand to help prepare material, but above all, joining the circle at the start and end of each workshop. In each and every case, the exercise involved taking notes, all the data having been recorded in a log book kept by both members of the research team.

Observing, living, feeling emotions, movements, changes, dynamics – and the ways in which the various players responded to these elements in the CC – generally captures the stance voluntarily assumed by both members of the research team.

Several **indirect and informal activities** were excellent opportunities to get a real sense of the CC and its team of instructors and contributors. For example, a day of strategic reflection with the partners and members of CHP's board of directors, held in September 2017; at the CHP Christmas party for the team at the director's home, in December 2017; at the CHP annual general meeting, and for the open house and press conference slated for October 2018, when Minister Jean-Yves Duclos (Canada Minister of Families, Children and Social Development) will pay CHP a visit. All of these events will have enabled the research team to identify the various elements tying CHP's values to its vision and to the objectives encompassing the CC – the relationship with participants, the preferred practices, interest in circus as a tool – while forging strong bonds with all the players involved.

### ACT 3 – Collective Creation

Now, let's get straight to the heart of the matter! As we've already seen, collective creation comprises one of the four types of activities run by CHP. We will now unpack these collective creations, as they have been observed, felt, experienced and witnessed. Three **CC were held between June 2017 and June 2018** – summer 2017, fall 2017, spring 2018 – the three periods that are the subject of this study.

CCs offer groups of young people who are homeless or who are precarious the experience of the circassian creative process ending with services offered in the community.

Accompanied and working in tandem with a team consisting of a circus instructor and social workers, young people are enrolled in a selection process. Once retained, they commit to participating to all CC's activities that last a period of 1 Month. In return, they receive an allowance. Circassian arts, used as tools to prevent homelessness and pre-employability, are also a pretext to meet: have an encounter with oneself; peers;

circus specialists; social workers; and the Community. This may be an alternative to the street-related survival modes that are, for example, solicitation, squeegee, theft, drug dealing or prostitution. The responses by the CC component that were proposed to the young people and identified at the end of the years of working with them are the 5 following orders:

- *create link with the most difficult to reach young people*
- *offer them an opportunity to experience a space of action, creation and individual and collective reflection that supports the ability to take its place in the community*
- *Enable these young people to develop pre-employability skills such as punctuality, motivation and perseverance;*
- *Promote opportunities for a positive group experience and gain improvement thus the esteem they have of themselves (empowerment);*
- *Build bridges between these young people and the community, in a spirit of sharing and discovery*

First, we will examine the major elements of all three collective creations, and then we will explore each one in detail, reviewing the key findings of the study in an illustrative and synthetical manner. At a single glance, you will be able to see the results of each collective creation. Following this presentation of results, the impacts and issues will be discussed, particularly in terms of the question of pre-employability. Act 3 will conclude with an emphasis on the fine skills of the players directly involved in the collective creations, and which ones, for instance the tightrope walkers, had to contend with at-risk situations.

## **Framework**

By framework, we mean the steps and activities common to all three collective creations. The framework also serves as the thread that ties every CC together, and ultimately, the entire CC program. It is the base for the instructors and community workers – and eventually for the young participants as well – to build upon, so, by definition, it is unshakeable. However, for CHP, this framework, under evaluation since 2010, has become more flexible, and therefore is always a bit in flux. It was also affected by a change in management between 2012 and 2016, and the transition from the status as a “program” to a not-for-profit (OBNL). Although the framework is unanimously endorsed by all CC stakeholders, it is porous enough to accommodate modifications that will serve to strengthen it or increase the significance of its initiatives. We already have a better idea of the young participants’ role in the process, as well as of the work done “without a net” (to borrow a circus phrase) by those carrying out the program. In fact, it is over the course of the CC process – and above all through interactions with the young participants, their concerns and struggles – that the framework has been refined, clarified and justified.

An example of the slow building of this framework is the **Timeline** which was developed and articulated over the first two collective creations, but made visible on a piece of cardboard by a

community worker at the start of the third CC. For the young participants, this timeline, which set the pace, was at once a challenge and a reference point, and it excited interest from the moment it was introduced. Suddenly, everything became clearer and more concrete. Since then, the Timeline has become a powerful pedagogical tool. We will return to it later on.

The framework also includes the **process**. Things are of course in motion... Many elements are in motion, in fact, and always with a view to adapting to the new cohorts of young participants. However, certain elements recur from CC to CC. The Timeline and the Cycle of Emotions also support a large portion of the steps in the process.

The process is always launched one or two weeks prior to the session with selection interviews, held at the offices of the partner or collaborating organizations, who had also helped with promotion. While, for the first CC, it was only the main community worker who undertook the interviews, the team quickly realized that it was crucial for a circus instructor to be present. On the one hand, having the two players take part in this important step of the process ensured that they would already be acting in tandem (the “tandem-gaze,”), and, on the other hand, lightened the community worker’s considerable load. So, for the second CC, the latter was joined by a circus instructor, and for the third, two tandems (each with one instructor and one community worker) carried out the selection interviews. This last scenario – the ideal, it goes without saying – was made possible thanks to the contribution of one of the partner organizations that made a community worker available to CHP for the entire duration of the CC. Each time, between twenty and thirty meetings were held and analyzed by the CC team. Of these, ten participants were selected based on four essential criteria: motivation, residential precariousness, availability and the need for a life plan. The other candidates were placed on a waiting list. From experience, we know that over the first days of the workshop, some participants will abandon the CC without an explanation. At this point, new participants can be invited to join the group.

The ten young participants thus begin their CC experience, illustrated overall by the 7 Steps of the Timeline, spread out over the CC’s thirteen workshops: general information session (workshop 1); exploration (workshops 2-5); creation (workshops 6-8), finishing touches (workshops 9-10); dress rehearsal (workshop 11), show (workshop 12); assessment (workshop 13).

The first workshop has three objectives:

- to provide general information on the process of the CC;
- to get to know each participant better, meeting each one individually and establishing their personal goals – this is the “zero hour”;
- to create a group dynamic. The shape of the workshop was officially set at the third CC.

That was when the young participants – nervous, sometimes even anxious – asked a thousand questions, 138 personal circumstances to discuss, which required time to listen, to empathize

and to respond. The CC team also had a ton of information to relay, in order to ensure the smooth running of – and to optimize the participation in – the workshop. Over the course of several team meetings, it was decided that an entire workshop, the first, had to be added and dedicated to the presentation of this process, its demands, challenges and issues; operations; code of conduct; type of show that would be created; Timeline; Cycle of Emotions; issue of pre-employability; and the group warm-up exercises and games – all of this would be addressed in this first workshop. At the same time, we could not expect these young people to stay seated and absorbing all this information for four hours! They would need to move. So, to keep them engaged, the group leaders kept their bodies moving, too!

The four other workshops that first week are slated for exploration. This is the time for the group to get acquainted: with the other youth they will be spending four intense weeks with, and with the circus world, which for many is as yet unfamiliar. Relationships are forged and tested: with circus, among the participants, with the tandem, trying things out, taking risks... or not. This first week generates questions for some, and adjustments for others. This is why the main community worker designed a Cycle of Emotions diagram along with the Timeline. This diagram is a schematic representation of the emotional process the participants undergo, in conjunction with the activities related to each of the stages on the Timeline:

*...How can I do this? I've never done this before in my life! This is not a vacation! I'm going to be so sore tomorrow! I'm embarrassed to do this in front of the others. Should I stay? Will I really fit in with the group? What do I do to stand out? Technically speaking: I stayed up for the first time on the rola-bola! I did hand-to-hand and nailed the figures! I'm in better shape than I thought! Guess I should do some more resistance training! I'm learning how to watch the audience. I'm trying to let my imagination run free, to be daring, to be vulnerable in front of the group! I never thought I'd be able to do this!*

It is clear how important it is for the instructors and community workers to be present for this step.

It goes so fast! **Almost halfway** through the session, the young participants meet with the community workers individually to discuss “how things have gone from the ‘zero hour’ to now.” To do so, the questions asked are basically the same at both meetings.

The next three workshops help the group dive into the **creative process**. This is when they invent, fool around, come out of their shells, and then unite as they work towards a common goal. Each participant works with their strengths, often surpassing them, to their great surprise! The best bits are saved, to be potentially integrated into a rough draft of a show. The instructors are vigilant and visionary, making links between the attempts of some and the small triumphs of the others. And then, before moving onto the next step, a small joy... They break into CHP's **costume** holdings! Most of the participants let themselves go nuts: a cap here, a skin-tight body suit there... sometimes, just one element of clothing can transform an introvert into an extrovert.

Two **workshops** giving time **for the finishing touches** follow. The objective: Never give up! The participants work in small groups. The numbers are rehearsed, changes are made, costumes are finished and refined. Woe betide the partner who dares to be absent! Fatigue and stress set in. Some like rehearsing the same thing over and over, others make up small moves to enhance their part. This is when the young participants have to trust the CC team, because they are not yet able to see the final shape all of this work will take (and neither does the research team!).

Then comes the **dress rehearsal**. The anxiety ratchets up yet another notch. Some are nervous and take a step back. Parents and friends are invited, but not all the participants have people to invite. The exercise is no less important for them! They have succeeded in doing something... It might not be perfect, they say to themselves, but there is no missing the spark of pride in their eyes. They put on their costumes, help each other with makeup. This time, they go through the entire show in one shot. People are watching and smiling! This is when the young participants are more attentive to the others' performances, when they learn humility and the art of laughing it off when they mess up a move.

And then comes the culmination of all their work, **the show** that means the end of intensive work, a unique experience, individually and collectively. The final performance is an accomplishment, a manifestation of all this shared effort, a chance to prove something to themselves, to not let the group down, or simply because it's fun!:

*I did it, I did it! It's the first time I saw something all the way through! It wasn't perfect, but I just did it over! I'm proud of myself, I didn't know I could go so far!*

The audience watches, entertained, interested, astounded, they applaud enthusiastically. Each of these three collective creations has been something completely different, the direct outcome of the event to which it was connected.

Closure comes with a two-part **assessment at the end of process**: the first occurs right after the show; the second a month later. The assessment is a chance to come down to earth, to relive the best moments together, to discuss what could be improved in the process, to share successes and challenges, to look at the photographs and watch the videos. Over the course of the three collective creations, the CC team developed various dynamic activities in order to elicit the participants' impressions, to consult with them, to check in with them and get a sense of how they were feeling "post-experience." The second meeting a month later, held by the instructor-community worker tandem, provides the opportunity to re-evaluate the circumstances of the participants in the medium term, and, if necessary, to guide them to the appropriate resources.

Obviously, none of this would be possible without the context provided by a **code of conduct**, considered by the team at the start, and then, over the course of the collective creations, gradually modified and massaged through discussions with the young participants. The code of conduct is closely tied to the issue of pre-employability and to what it implies, i.e. essential life skills. It also depends on the group dynamic. In order to facilitate potential employment, each

participant receives a stipend, conditional upon their respect of the code of conduct and perfect attendance from the start to the end of the CC. Unexplained tardiness is evaluated on a case-by-case basis by the CC team and may be penalized by a reduced stipend, while more serious cases may result in the participant being dismissed from the program. We will further discuss the form the code of conduct takes when co-designed with the young participants in the Impacts and Issues section.

In conclusion, we should mention that each of the CC's thirteen workshops also has its own framework, which is to say that some pedagogical activities recur. Two examples come immediately to mind: the circle at the beginning and the end; the inevitable warm-ups and stretches.

The first is the **gathering circle**, mentioned in Act 1, the circle that has everyone's gaze intersecting and all participants positioned to share in a non-hierarchical way. At the start of the workshop, the circle gives everyone time to ask themselves, "How am I doing today?" Everyone expresses themselves honestly with the option of not saying anything on tougher days: instructors, community workers, as well as the members of the research team! The group leaders also use the opportunity to present the plan for the workshop or to address any lingering items of business: for instance, reminding someone to bring a bird image for a costume, or giving someone the opportunity to apologize for misbehaving the day before. The circle at the end of the day is intended to calm everyone down, review that day's session, and eventually for the group as a whole to address any issues encountered during the CC. The CC team members are the calibrators of the mood around the circle, bringing up the energy or relaxing everyone, encouraging openness or introspection, as needed in the moment.

**The warm-ups, stretches and group games** are activities that prepare both the body and the mind. They recur each and every session. Sometimes, the stretches are abandoned, especially towards the end of the process, when everyone is fully immersed in their number, and time is flying by! But these moments are important so that the body is ready for whatever is required of it, and the entire team is completely alert. These physical activities can take several forms – fun, pedagogical, thematic – all of which, while pursuing their main goal, also seek to stimulate several facets of human development – cooperation, interpersonal skills, communication, active listening – most of the time related to social targets: self-awareness, self-confidence, conferring, observing, exploring one's body.

### **ACT 3- Impacts and Issues**

In the previous section, several aspects of the effects of the collective creations and some of the difficulties encountered have already been mentioned. The experience provided by the CC is first and foremost a process. It is therefore understandable that the impacts and issues can arise well before Act 3! By impact, we mean a possible effect, attributable to a group of factors

put forward by CHP: a vision; the players involved; a combination of procedures, methods and tools.

The circus is not the only art form that liberates the body and the mind. Other artistic disciplines do the same thing, as illustrated by the Chaire de recherche UQAM pour le développement de pratiques innovantes en art, culture et mieux-être [UQAM Research Chair for the Development of Innovative Practices in Art, Culture and Well-being]. Yet, in and of itself, circus includes the performing arts (acting, performance, costumes, makeup) and several disciplines suitable for young people looking for variety and change. However, the tools available to measure progress and to apprehend the difficulties encountered by the engineers of these art forms have yet to be adapted. The practice of social circus is situated outside performance, and the pace is set by the participants. Therefore, the necessity of identifying or measuring what the art does to justify its funding, particularly for community work, is entirely beside the point (Trudelle and Rachédi, 2018). Developing a relationship of trust with young people at risk – who are as fragile as they are strong – while attempting to calibrate the changes they are going through, is extremely complex. This complexity is compounded, as they are not even fully aware of what they are experiencing at the time, precisely because of the change-in-progress!

## Impacts

We are always on the lookout for the impacts of these circus activities, and we all know these are legion! They occur on several levels and are related to various skill groups and to the founding principles of the collective creations, to circus and its myriad possibilities, as well as to the professionalism of the facilitating tandem of community worker and circus instructor. We will now delve more deeply into the impacts on the young participants, the CC team and the community at large. Nothing can be categorically linked directly to the CC. But is that what CC team is looking for? Are not the “effects” a sort of binding agent ensuring consistency and balance between a person’s strengths and vulnerabilities? Let’s look at a few examples:

In the collective creations, the participants are welcomed and recognized for who they are: the emphasis is on **building on everyone’s strengths** by giving their creativity free rein. This is accomplished during the discussions about the code of conduct, the choice of makeup, the disciplines to work on for their number, the way they are directed onstage so that it is clear to everyone. Choosing costumes is a main event. They dive into CHP’s costume holdings, and immediately, they are transported elsewhere! They try everything on, in their bubble, and look at themselves in the mirror. They solicit feedback from those nearby, and ask them to take some photos. We, as observers, see them in an entirely new light. In the next workshop, they are still going through the costumes, looking, no doubt, for something that matches the idea they had over the weekend, or they decide to trade a costume element with someone else. Invested, they are engaged in the act of creation, of self-acceptance, or else trying on the

person they aspire to be, a type of self-affirmation. In their own words, they have learned to know themselves, to think about themselves, to respect themselves.

The CC also gained success on another level, by presenting to the young participants how to consider **facing challenges** as , “learning opportunities” on a daily basis: such as refusing to do certain figures because it could hurt, because of fear, not being in the right state of mind, or all of the above. Identifying what was bothering them, know when to take a step back or when to take a deep breath. There was also the question of **proximity**... For some, just touching or being touched was a major challenge. Nothing was expected or required, but, in the heat of the moment, fears were forgotten and there they were, performing a hand-to-hand figure! Or the overweight participant who had no idea what to do for the performance, but who was able to execute figures that suited them with a partner, leading to a juggling act on a rola-bola. Or another who went over to their partner’s house when the partner was going through a difficult time, and paying for their bus fare to make sure they could attend the CC assessment session. Or the one who wanted to quit, ambivalent from start to finish, barely participating, but the group would not give up, and who, without any warning, ended up carrying another participant on their shoulders for the final performance: *I did it so I wouldn’t let down the others*. In some cases, the strength of the group had unexpected consequences. In others, the CC made it possible for the young people to confront their stage fright and attain a certain pride in their accomplishment.

Sometimes, art became an essential part of their lives. For several, the CC would **open a door to other art forms** and avenues of expression. Participants reported that after their CC experience, they more often or even regularly attended free art workshops offered by various organizations. Others continued exploring the circus arts by attending the regular CHP workshops, auditioning for circus school, or signing up for more advanced courses.

The group of participants became a safe space in which it was possible to laugh together, to applaud each other, a place to speak up and to share. They brought food to taste, discussed their dietary issues, and how they were coping, or not. *Here, I learned how to trust other people. I’m leaving with new friends... I’m not going to learn anything by staying in my room!* They opened up more, understood more, judged less.

Discovering their abilities and creativity in order to make something of themselves, and facing challenges in a team where they felt they could be themselves, **all constitute opportunities to (re)gain self-confidence**, by consenting to reveal themselves, first in a small group, and then in front of an audience. Luckily, the masks they wore in performance protected those who were not yet ready for this big reveal! These participants reported that the CC made them want to work on other projects, to do something with their lives. One wished it wasn’t over, another didn’t want to go back to their life and their problems. They also expressed the wish to eat better, to be more active, to lose weight, to stop smoking, to eat less, to be more disciplined. As we can see, these results are not quantifiable, but they do demonstrate the gradual

incorporation of the process in fits and starts or all at once, opening up all kinds of avenues for change in the future rather than providing solid evidence of a major change in the present.

But, above and beyond those directly targeted, **the effects were also felt more broadly** by the CC team and the **community**. The CC team must be recognized for their flexibility and adaptability in the medium term regarding the code of conduct. The background is worth reviewing in greater detail.

As previously discussed, the code of conduct and the participation agreement were drafted by the CC team. They were designed so that the former would state the founding principles, while the second outlined the “how.” Through the years, without a fixed plan, and by trial and error, the CC team attempted to convey through these two documents the needs of the youth, their mission and values. Over time, always in direct consultation with those most affected – the young participants – a shift occurred in the population reached, with variable profiles and the established and more constrained rules. Attaining a certain maturity and benefiting from the presence of the research team for an entire year, the CC team took the opportunity to take a step back and reflect more deeply on these questions. Following these discussions, considerations, mini-surveys of the young participants and team discussions during the first two CC – all of which was related to a growing sense of unease when applying the rules that threatened to have the participant’s stipend reduced or even to have the offending party dismissed – that the “framework” assumed an entirely new, more inclusive, connotation. The team wanted to avoid adding to the youth’s anxiety or to their list of failures, at all costs, nor did it want to subject them to another type of exclusion or rejection! As everyone well knows, it is easier to build a solid structure from the very beginning, in order to avoid losing control and face interminable problems. However, the CC team opted to devise the code of conduct with the young participants over the course of each CC. And interminable problems certainly cropped up! That said, the team was willing to put itself in a vulnerable position, and the discomfort lasted for several days. It was enough to remember the CC’s founding principles and the pride of place CHP assigned at-risk youth, to rally them to give the youth the power by providing an inclusive and supportive framework. For these young people, the opportunity to get involved in making decisions about the code of conduct enabled them to learn even more about autonomy, decision making and self-determination, while the CC team was able to put itself in the vulnerable position of the young participants, and to experience it fully. Thus, the experience influenced both the way the CC team saw the youth and the way they addressed them. At the same time, **it made it possible to help the young participants develop new skills.**

On yet another level, the CC team mentioned more than once their pleasure doing the work, seeing small exercises take shape to become a circus number. They were always impressed with what was accomplished, the journey made, its intensity, and they could not stop remarking changes they observed in the young people. It was also incredibly stimulating that the CC enabled them to interact with the youth, while exercising their range of skills, which made complete sense to them, since all of their skills were called upon.

*Enriching the world with circus is a gift. It means reconnecting with the human aspect; coming out of it recharged and motivated means learning more about oneself by interacting with others.*

Clearly, these are **all impacts of the CC and of the interaction between the youth and the CC team**. It even seems to be a significant part of their earnings!

The effects on the community were examined during the CC1 and CC2 performances, who were later presented to an audience of peers – participants, facilitators and professionals – all crazy about circus! Two circus performances were enough to determine that these young people touched their audience, who appreciated these festive and colourful interludes. Their parents were pleasantly surprised:

*I was so impressed! I didn't think my daughter had that kind of talent! Their friends were proud, and the collaborating organizations were pleased: These young people seemed so comfortable, it was hard to believe that they were at-risk youth.*

We were able to assess the impacts and **outcomes, that pertains to the young participants, their immediate circle and community at large**; as a single individual action is usually not enough to ensure that those at risk are able to reintegrate into society, unless accompanied by community outreach and related factors (Bellot and Rivard, 2017; Chambon, 2017; Ott, 2013). To this effect, the RAPSIM (2013: 3) asserts that “the economic, political, social and cultural context in which homeless people evolve constitutes one of the major determining factors of their health and well-being.”

It is no surprise that these results are rife with pitfalls, changes of course, constant adjustments. Several have already been identified. Of course alternatively, each participant has their own issues and each group has its own dynamic, requiring a lot of energy and attention, and issues arise within the team, and in terms of human and material resources. Last but not least, and unavoidably, there are methodological issues, as we will see.

## **Issues**

**Each participant registered in a CC represents a life being lived**, more or less complicated by processes in progress or by some dreams either dowsed or under construction. They may be conducting healthy or unhealthy relationships with others or with family members, indulging in drugs or alcohol to forget, to survive, or because of an addiction. They may be able to express themselves, or not. These young people are joining a group in which, hopefully, they will already know one or two others: because they signed up together, because they've seen each other somewhere before, because they were in a prior CC together, or because they've already met occasionally at CHP's regular workshops. They are either apathetic or need to keep moving constantly, and often present with anxiety or a medical diagnosis. Some have not eaten, and

several have just woken up. Some stayed out all night partying and have barely slept. Soon enough, or **gradually, the participants will learn to control themselves, to work together**, the intensity of the experience serving as a breeding ground for a completely new dynamic. It takes courage to start on a new path. That's probably what everyone has in common: the courage and the desire for a fresh start!

This leads us straight to the matter of **safety**, which also touches on the individual and the collective and could be explained by the feeling of belonging to the group. The group is like a family, according to several of the young participants, a family in which “we take care of each other, we have to, because it's a matter of safety – entrepreneurial, fraternal and circus safety – taking care of someone else in order to feel safe. This is a basic life lesson, and more than that, a way of becoming “safety-minded” (Rivard, 2007: 204). Safety requires constant vigilance, as everyone was reminded the hard way during the first CC! It is established at the same time as confidence, both accruing meaning over time, ideally until they gain awareness that safety also means maintaining the equipment so that it stays safe.

Safety and confidence are synonymous with **stability**. Without indulging in an unfortunate play on words, in a state of financial instability, CHP is not often able to hire staff on a full-time basis. Naturally, the organization ensures that each CC has the benefit of the same team of instructors for the entire the month. For 2017–18, it benefited from a full-time community worker, and most of the time, another community worker, which the partner organizations made available for each CC., supported this person.

The “casual” nature of these teams is in fact the cause of a whole chain of employment insecurity, which always puts CHP at risk of losing precious human resources and of not being able to recover from these losses. Moreover, although each CC has its own story, the fact that a community worker or instructor has never been part of a CC before, or not for a long while, means (re)adjustments, (re)adaptations, (re)learning, and therefore, inevitably, less attention paid to what is actually happening in the room. These are mere glimpses at the issues of safety and consistency that can crop up. The research team witnessed the varying conditions, and even the optimal conditions attained in the third CC, which benefited from the same two community worker-instructor tandems for the entire session. Furthermore, it can even be posited that the presence of a complete and stable team for the third CC had an influence on the fact that all ten participants stayed with the process for the duration.

There is also the matter of **the participants' self-selection** and **self-dismissal**; it is unavoidable. Those who show an interest and sign up for the selection interview are interested in circus activities.

At the same time, the comment of a former participant cannot be overlooked: *I asked myself if I was messed up enough to be picked!* Young people, who do not consider themselves to be at risk (GIAP et al., to appear) might have a mistaken perception of the aims of the CC, might not consider themselves to be targeted by the activities therefore possibly self eliminate

themselves. Some might figure out after just one workshop that this is not for them, but... there is the monetary incentive, and it is not easy to say no to that... Out of the 30 CC, we only observed one case in which a young person barely participated, barely integrated into the group, but who nevertheless managed to have their own moments of glory during the process and definitely helped the whole group make progress. And we also know with absolute certainty that several participants heard their spellbound friends talk about the CC.

Two other elements related to the three CC also raised their own set of issues: **the type of show and the very end** of the CC experience. In the first case, we observed the major influence that the “show-mission” had on the direction, operations and even pedagogy of each CC. As previously mentioned, in the Framework section and illustrated in the Around the Ring section; each CC had its own distinct formula: outside, including four evenings of audience interaction and three of static interaction on the street facing the Beaudry metro station; inside, with focussed audience attention at Montréal’s Écomusée du Fier monde; and in front of an audience whose attention was split. Lastly, the shorter acts were presented as part of a major provincial festival of social circus in Baie St-Paul. All of these opportunities were extremely exciting, as much for the tandems as for the young participants, but it is easy to grasp the difficulties they presented for both parties. For the former, the challenge was to guarantee that the basic lessons were learned in a calm, pleasant atmosphere, despite the expected outcome. For the latter, the challenge was to perform practically blind, while it is extremely difficult to visualize something they had never before seen or experienced. Such a situation could have led to a high level of stress for everyone; however, this did not actually come to pass in any of the CC. There was some jaw clenching, but nothing that couldn’t be handled.

The **issues** related to the **research methodology emerged** from these issues. They appeared from the very start of the participant observation, raising a number of questions: **how would we measure or even qualify** the changes in attitude and behaviour, or modifications in the young participants’ lifestyle, which were extremely irregular, hidden and changeable from day to day, night before to the morning after? How would we compare the before and after when several participants showed up with a rationale of social desirability, but then left the CC often more aware of what was happening to them, with a sense of belonging to a group and valuable relationships with the CC and research teams? How could we discuss these aspects when several of these young people self-identified with their medical diagnosis, which they dragged around like an explanation and like a ball and chain? What did we retain, when, in terms of well-being, our observations did not correlate with what a participant said? In short, how could we record transformations when some were still barely perceptible, or when the youth said simply, but clearly and enthusiastically, *It’s really cool?*

Another methodological issue related to the **data collection tools**, considered with the main community worker, as a function of the information needs in the medium and long terms, with a view that they would be user-friendly for the CC team on the one hand, and accessible and enjoyable for the participants on the other. However, the CC team’s adoption of these tools

was gradual, and, even with the guidance of the research team, the first experiments with the young people were more like leading the witness than a real discussion! Everyone has agreed that little by little, with some more training, they will come closer to the desired objective, which is to turn these meetings into comfortable, informal conversations, in which the young participants feel they are being listened to, confident enough to share their reflections on where they are in their development, should they have any reflections to share.

To conclude, the potential for a series of methodological issues arises in the case of participatory **research with young participants living with various challenges**. This participation alone requires constant vigilance regarding the conduct appropriate for a research context, which automatically places the researchers in a position of authority. This is even truer in participant-observation scenarios, in terms of listening and respect, and even during fun circus activities, when physical contact is common and interactions are intense, heightened by a growing confidence and prone to triggering emotions. The age criteria and relationships between the young participants and the members of the research team assert themselves.

Thus, the young participants may address a member of the research team either as a friend or even as a potential romantic interest, or as a facilitator, confidant, or even mother figure. While these relationships are valuable and sources of hard-won data, they are also potential vehicles of ambiguity, confusion or false hopes, which the young participants certainly do not need. The honesty and frankness between the two members of the research team, in addition to the transparency and openness maintained with the CC team, particularly in the post-workshop assessments, fostered a vigilance at all times and gradually established a clear, firm and yet warm position for the two research-team members.

In conclusion, everyone involved had issues. This intense month spent in such close proximity meant that issues for some became issues for the others. We will see in the section The Players... A Balancing Act how the CC team faced these challenges, while the next section will contextualize the impacts mentioned above within the CC's pre-employability mandate.

The logo for the Government of Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag above the letter "a".

Funded in part by the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy  
Innovative Solutions to Homelessness

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily  
reflect those of the Government of Canada