

Using social circus to help vulnerable youth and special needs students

In the 2013 President's Challenge Youth Social Enterprise of the Year Award, Circus In Motion was commended for its efforts and achievements in using circus acts as an art form to reach out to vulnerable youth, equip them with life skills and provide them with employment opportunities. It was founded by former social worker Jay Che, after he had learned of Cirque du Monde's successful use of circus skills to empower troubled youth.

In its citation, the Awards Committee noted that Circus In Motion also conducted circus programmes for special education schools and corporations. Since 2007, it has trained and employed 12 disadvantaged youth as trainers, who also serve as role models for other youth.

Seeing a social need

In Singapore's educational system, low-achieving young people, who include intellectually-challenged students, make up a significant proportion of their cohort. They are usually students from the normal technical stream. Many of them are struggling to realise their full potential.

While working as a social worker, Jay Che noticed that socially-disadvantaged children and vulnerable youth were often not given the opportunities to express themselves and show their abilities through alternative means. As a result, the children were considered low-achieving students while the youth had difficulty acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills for employment. He saw the need to raise their self-esteem and self-confidence for them to do better in schools and to find work to earn a living.

Staying the course to change more lives

Jay joined the Tampines Family Service Centre as a social worker in 2002, after graduating from the National University of Singapore with a double

degree in social work and geography. For three years, he was handling guidance programme for juvenile offenders, school-based counselling and financial assistance cases. During that time, he was also running a social circus programme at the centre, in partnership with Cirque du Monde, the social circus arm of the world-renowned Cirque du Soleil. As Jay recalled, the seed was planted then.

He first got to know of Cirque du Monde in 2001 when he was doing his internship at the Tampines Family Service Centre as a student. In 2002 and 2003, Cirque du Monde sent Jay to its Asia-Pacific base in Australia for training as an instructor. The stints got him deeper into circus arts. He was intrigued by how circus arts could help vulnerable youth to become wholesome persons, after they learned about perseverance, teamwork, respect and self-esteem.

Pursuing the social cause

Cirque du Monde spent only four weeks a year in Singapore, and this was not enough to meet the demand. Jay saw the gap that needed to be filled. He was doing it as a freelancer for a couple of years, before he and his wife decided to set up Circus In Motion in 2007 to pursue social circus arts full-time throughout the year. After helping to establish the social enterprise, his wife returned to the corporate world as a business development manager in a recruitment firm. In 2008, Jay was again sent by Cirque du Monde for further circus training in Australia.

Circus In Motion aims to equip vulnerable youth with life skills through circus arts. Jay wants to give low-achieving young people the opportunity to feel good about their abilities and to provide them with an alternative springboard to develop their self-esteem and creativity.

Leveraging on what he knows best and loves

Before his exposure to Cirque du Monde, Jay was already interested in circus arts and had taught himself how to perform some of the acts. Combining his knowledge and experience in social work with social circus to help vulnerable youth would seem the most natural thing for him to do.

Organising for social impact

Circus In Motion's business model is based on work integration of disadvantaged persons and meeting a social need. The social enterprise is organised into three main operations – workshops for beneficiaries, corporate circus shows and team-building workshops. Jay manages the enterprise with his wife's assistance and the services of four regular and six ad hoc freelance instructors/performers. The 10 of them are all former beneficiaries of the social circus programme that Jay was involved in nine to 12 years ago.

Providing life-skill training and beyond

The circus arts training programme conducted by Jay for schools comprises 13 two-hour lessons on life skills, including teamwork, perseverance, igniting of creativity and boosting of self-esteem. The course is targeted at troubled youth studying in the schools that sign up with Circus In Motion.

Although Jay had not set out to train professional circus performers, a small group of beneficiaries who had completed the basic course wanted to train others and perform for a living. After leaving school, they contacted Jay. After the group was formed, it simply grew bigger. Much as he would like to train the intellectually-challenged to become instructors, Jay did not as they would not be able to conduct the training sessions independently.

As performers, they continue to build their self-confidence and self-esteem. As instructors, they have the chance to share their experiences and life's lessons with their students (when they teach, they learn twice). Jay now has a pool of circus performers and instructors who are aged 17 to 26. They are hired for projects that Circus In Motion takes on.

Helping to improve lives of disadvantaged youth and students

The youth beneficiaries that Circus In Motion engages as instructors and performers are compensated on a project basis. They supplement their income by performing at other events.

Jay cited two special needs students who stood out from among the many who had attended the programme. One was a Metta School student who chose juggling, which was the most difficult to learn, worked harder than the others without any complaint, and performed a four-ball juggling routine at the ChildAid charity concert in 2013.

In the other case, a 15-year-old boy from Katong School attended only half of the lessons. He also chose juggling and searched the web for tricks to learn so that he could impress his instructors. His five-ball juggling act took him one year to learn (half of Circus In Motion instructors cannot do it). He is now 17 years old and studying at APSN Delta Senior School. (APSN – Association of People with Special Needs)

As an indication of just how far the beneficiaries have come, Jay confessed that he cannot perform some of their acts.

What beneficiaries say

Ethan and Edward are two of Circus In Motion's regular instructors and performers who were trained by Jay in circus arts 10 years ago when they were in secondary school.

For Ethan, he was asked to take part in the social circus workshop in school as his teachers had thought he could do better academically. Since his primary school days, he had been shy to speak up due to his unusual voice. Jay was his first instructor who taught him the basic course. Initially, he found it hard to understand and perform the circus acts. So he worked hard to be as good as the instructors. He went on to attend the intermediate training at Circus Outreach that lasted a total of 26 hours. Besides learning circus acts, he improved on his self-esteem and became more self-confident after learning how to overcome his personal problems.

After completing the school workshop, Ethan was practising circus acts with Jay before joining Circus In Motion as a regular freelancer in 2013. This was after completing his national service and graduating with a Diploma in Game Design from Republic Polytechnic.

Giving A Helping Hand

Now 24, Ethan conducts two or three school workshops a week and performs at a corporate event every other week on average, depending on the time of the year as such engagements are seasonal. He specialises in poi (fireball at end of string), cigar boxes (12 of them) and diabolo, which he had learned from others. He also try to craft his own routines and value-add in a creative way. In addition to presenting higher-skill acts with more props and add-on features such as lighted boxes, he enhances acts that people already like to watch.

He decided to become a circus instructor and performer as he was passionate about circus arts and enjoys teaching kids and bringing out the best in them. He considers performance as the litmus test of circus skills. Seeing his students, especially special needs kids, perform at events has been most gratifying for him. Some of them had performed at the Republic Cultural Centre and a Community Chest charity show in 2014.

Teaching special needs students has been an eye-opening experience for Ethan, who realised they wanted to be treated the same way although they knew they were different due to their limited abilities. They need more repetition to do the circus acts. However, he finds that they are easy to work with and like to have fun during training.



Two of the performers at the Community Chest concert telecast live on TV in 2011 were special needs school students, who showed they could perform just as well as Circus In Motion instructors. (Photo credit: Circus In Motion)

While he feels good to be called a role model for other youth for what he has achieved, Ethan prefers to be known for why he did it. While he does not think that he will do circus for the rest of his life, he has no plan to stop completely either. He may decide to train as a teacher at the National Institute of Education and pursue his dream job as an educator in future.

Like Ethan, Edward works as a regular freelance instructor and performer with Circus In Motion. He is now into his third year with the company. He conducts about two school workshops a week and performs at corporate events one to four times each month. He specialises in the diabolo, two-hat trick, spinning porcelain bowl and giant cube.

He joined Circus In Motion after completing his national service and a two-year course in digital audio/video production at the Institute of Technical Education. He went through circus training with Ethan when they were in secondary two 10 years ago. Unlike Ethan though, he had volunteered for the course as he was interested in circus arts and wanted to perform to entertain others. After being taught by Jay, he learned new acts from the web and from a group of amateur jugglers who were practising their craft in the underpass at the Esplanade.

From his experience with circus arts, Edward realised that he could perform various acts by training and practising harder, although he was a slow learner. He decided to take up a career in circus arts as it would give him the opportunity to go to different places instead of staying put at one workplace. What he likes most about his role as an instructor is the chance to help his students, who are special needs children and youth-at-risk, to do well in circus acts. One of them is a quiet boy who has learned to perform a three-ball diabolo while he himself can do it with only two balls.

Being called a role model for other youth has only encouraged Edward to pursue his craft further. After all, he has worked hard to reach where he is today and plans to coach others in circus arts for the rest of his life. For him, it's a way of giving back to the community and continuing with what Jay had taught him. He dreams that one day Singapore will recognise circus acts as a mainstream art form, so that public support could be given for more people like him to take it up as a career. Looking at Edward today,

Giving A Helping Hand

it's hard to imagine that this former EM1 primary school student, who got addicted to computer games after losing interest in his study and had to move to the normal technical stream in secondary school, is now 'addicted' to circus arts. He's glad that he had turned to circus training to overcome his addiction to computer games.

Making social and business impact

Since it was set up, Circus In Motion has trained 6,800 vulnerable youth and 420 intellectually-challenged students in circus arts. Out of 12 of the youth who were employed as freelance instructors, 11 of them are still with the company.

To date, the social enterprise has conducted 51 circus workshops in 45 government and six special needs schools. Another 22 workshops were held in youth centres and gazetted homes for youth. A total of 7,000 youth and students participated in these 73 workshops in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.



At a workshop conducted by Circus In Motion at a school. (Photo credit: Circus In Motion)

Circus In Motion conducted a longitudinal study on the benefits of its programme for children in the 10-14 age group who had completed a minimum of 22-hour training. The study focused on their self-esteem using the Rosenberg scale. About 63% of them reported an increase in their self-esteem.

Overcoming challenges and learning from them

During the first four years, business was very slow as there was not much funding that Circus In Motion could tap for its programmes targeting youth-at-risk in schools. During that time, most of the funding went to support their academic programmes. As Jay recalled, it was difficult to convince schools to take up a circus arts intervention programme for this group of students eight years ago, as they could opt for the conventional counselling and group-work approach.

However, Jay and his team continued to market to schools and started to provide circus performances at corporate events to sustain the enterprise. About four years ago, more schools started to sign up for the programme as educators' attitude towards it changed and more government funding was provided to support programmes for the non-academically inclined students. Demand for Circus In Motion's training course increased as a result.

“Schools used to budget for only one instructor,” Jay remembered, “but after the Downtown East slashing incident, I noticed that they started to budget for more instructors.” That was when he began to pitch for more than one instructor.

Another challenge that the social enterprise faces till today is the fact that circus has not been officially considered an art form or a sport. Thus it finds it very difficult to get any funding from government organisations. It has tried to get itself recognised as an art or sport organisation to no avail. To sustain itself, Circus In Motion channelled its efforts into marketing to the corporate sector, as companies are always looking for suitable entertainment acts for their events.

From his experience, Jay realised that it's difficult to change the public's perception of people with special needs. People often wonder if they could

learn to perform circus acts. However, Circus In Motion has been able to train some of them to perform at various events, including charity shows to raise funds for the needy. For example, it gathered three groups of disadvantaged youth from two special needs schools (Katong and Metta Schools) and Gracehaven Home (for children under the Child's Protection Order) that it had trained, to audition and perform juggling, diabolo and poi at the ChildAid charity concert in 2013.

Jay had also found it difficult to balance the social and business aspects of his enterprise. He started by offering only workshops for disadvantaged youth but had to include corporate performances subsequently to sustain the enterprise. Whilst such commercial shows may not directly benefit the disadvantaged group, they help to generate revenue to keep Circus In Motion going in its social mission. At present, the ratio for the number of school workshops and the number of corporate performances is 65 to 35. "If the performance arm gets too big, we would have to find a way to balance it with our social component," Jay shared.

Working with partners

In addition to the 45 government and six special needs schools, Circus In Motion works with 17 VWOs (voluntary welfare organisations), which include youth centres and gazetted homes for youth. It will be working closely with the social enterprise Adrenalin Group as both complement each other.

Circus In Motion is a member of the Social Enterprise Association and the Asia-Pacific Social Circus Association.

Innovating for a social cause

Circus In Motion's social enterprise model is based on Cirque du Monde's social circus concept, which uses circus arts to impart life skills. Within the circus field, it has been looking for innovative ways to combine circus arts with schools' academic learning programmes in order to boost the take-up rate. To interest the schools, its workshops must be able to help improve the target students' academic results.



Jay Che (third from left) and Circus In Motion performers with the Mayor of Incheon and his wife during their circus-theatre tour of South Korea in 2014. (Photo credit: Circus In Motion)

For its performances, Circus In Motion is the first Singapore company to combine circus and theatre arts for a “Singapore-flavoured” theatre show, which toured South Korea in 2014. It was a localised version of the Cirque du Soleil show that was directed pro bono by Jeremiah Choy, Theatre Director of Orange Dot Productions.

Sustaining the social enterprise

Circus In Motion achieved “exponential growth” in the past two years, with the number of corporate performances doubling to over 80 in 2014 compared with 2013 and revenue was about twice that of the previous year. Jay thought the results could be due to more publicity being given to the social enterprise and innovation in its circus acts. It is making surplus each year.

How does Jay juggle between helping others (through circus workshops for disadvantaged groups) and sustaining his business (through circus performances for companies)? He explained: “There is no conflict of interest between the two, as 90% of the corporate gigs fall on weekends and all circus workshops are held on weekdays. Thus we are able to allocate our limited resources accordingly.”

Giving A Helping Hand

At present, 40% of the enterprise's revenue comes from its social circus workshops, 50% from corporate circus performances, less than 5% from corporate team-building activities and about 3% from the sale of circus props.

Jay considers the niche market as one of Circus In Motion's sustainability factors. It is possibly the only circus arts company offering social circus workshops with the relevant certification from Cirque du Monde. "We are also at the forefront of the Singapore market in terms of circus performances and we intend to maintain our leadership position by introducing new acts to the local entertainment scene," he disclosed.

Meeting future needs

Jay foresees an increase in demand for performances in future. For workshops, he thinks they might have reached the plateau already. However, Circus In Motion will be combining its circus training course with an academic programme to break into more Singapore schools.

He does not consider performances and workshops to be very scalable in terms of volume as it requires years of training to become an instructor or performer. "Whatever we can't scale in volume, we could scale in value," Jay added. "We are constantly creating higher-value performances so that our beneficiaries can generate more income with the same amount of time and efforts."

Caring for people and planet

Circus In Motion plans to grow the corporate entertainment market that is relatively undeveloped. It has invested in tools and props for its instructors/performers to upgrade their skills so that they can deliver higher-value acts to its corporate clients. This development would help to boost their income.

The value of its circus acts may be measured in two ways. For its social circus arm, the company uses circus acts to reinforce how disadvantaged students learn in an academic programme (based on Dunn & Dunn Learning Style model). For corporate shows, presentation of higher-skill acts and addition of incidental exposure (for companies' brands, products and services) would mean higher fees.

CEO's perspective

One outstanding achievement of Circus In Motion that Jay is particularly proud of is being the first group in Singapore to combine circus with theatre and to export a uniquely Singapore-flavoured circus show that went on a tour of Korea in 2014.

Jay has no doubt that his business model is sustainable on a small scale. However, whether it can be scalable is another issue. He explained that the amount of training and skills it takes to become a trainer and performer is a double-edged sword. While it may act as a high barrier to entry into the industry, it also makes it difficult to train someone new.

If he were to start Circus In Motion all over again, would he do it differently? “Yes” was his reply. So far, the company depends a great deal on well-trained instructors and performers to generate its income. “Perhaps we could have looked into the making and sale of juggling equipment that might be a lot more scalable,” he shared.



Acts of innovation – the Cyr wheel and the giant cube are circus acts that are unique to Circus In Motion. (Photo credit: Circus In Motion)

What Circus In Motion offers

- Social circus workshops for youth who are not academically inclined, vulnerable youth, juvenile offenders and children under Child Protection Order that are conducted in schools, youth centres and Ministry of Education-gazetted homes for youth. The course comprises 13 lessons of two hours each – four for learning about their strengths and next nine to hone their skills and practise their circus acts.
- Corporate circus performances at corporate functions and events organised by event companies.
- Corporate team-building activities involving circus acts, for corporate clients and event companies.
- Sale of circus props to students who attend Circus In Motion’s workshops.

Impact numbers at a glance

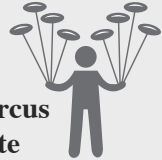
7,220

Circus In Motion beneficiaries trained as circus performers
6,800 vulnerable youth
420 intellectually-challenged students



12

beneficiary performers employed by Circus In Motion to date
11 currently employed as freelancers



73

circus workshops conducted by Circus In Motion to date
51 workshops in schools – 45 MOE, 6 special needs
22 workshops in youth centres and gazetted homes for youth



7,000
workshop participants to date

7000 participants from schools, youth centres and gazetted homes for youth
4 countries involved (including Singapore)

