

Salida Business Incubator: InnovateHER Statement of Support

The team of judges at the Salida Business Incubator has unanimously selected the Salida Circus from our regional contestants as our nominee for the national InnovateHER 2016 competition.

We reviewed all of our regional candidates' submissions and hosted a local competition where we asked each candidate to present their business plan and address how their products or services would have a measurable impact on the lives of women and families, would have the potential for commercialization, and would fill a need in the marketplace. A summary of how we saw that Salida Circus meets the InnovateHER challenge criteria is included below. We are pleased to support this innovative and inspiring woman-owned business as a candidate for the national competition.

Salida Circus has a measurable impact on the lives of women and families

"Social circus" refers to a tool for personal development, physical fitness and community building. This circus training is provided in a non-competitive, nurturing and inclusive environment. It's animal free and sexism free, based only on human learning and expression that is free from sexual stereotyping. Training is based on achieving personal goals rather than competition with others. What began as a weekly back yard stilt workshop in 2007, under Jennifer Dempsey's leadership, has now grown into a full time operation with 6 weekly workshops, two annual camps and more than 60 performances per year.

Salida Circus teaches social circus skills such as aerial, stilt-walking, acrobalance, and clowning providing a unique blend of physical activity, artistic expression, and fun! Salida Circus also offers "Business of Circus" training for young entrepreneurs and provides acts-for-hire with their professional instructors and student performers offering circus acts for corporate parties, festivals, fund-raisers, birthday parties, circus-grams, and other events. The Salida circus school program teaches children and teens to cooperate in teams, collaborate in non-violent ways and learn new skills in a non-competitive, nurturing and inclusive environment.

Jennifer Dempsey spent 12 years with the Belfast Community Circus School (BCCS) in Northern Ireland which was established in 1985 as a conflict resolution program using circus as a way to bring Catholic and Protestant children together in a peaceful, non-confrontational way. Jennifer is one of 21 social circus practitioners in the United States recognized by the American Youth Circus Organization and American Circus Educators, and is the only recognized circus practitioner who has established a year-round social circus training program and youth performance troupe.

Jennifer established Salida Circus in 2007 to follow the BCCS model of "*Circus with a Purpose*" to help families, provide career and entrepreneurial pathways, and play a role in developing successful, contributing human beings with purpose and potential. The Salida Circus approach holds high appeal for marginalized youth, pulling them into participation in a way that is non-threatening. It also appeals to youth who don't fit traditional competitive sports by providing a "low-cost-of-entry" activity that emphasizes self-esteem and personal best. A significant key to success for the Salida Circus programs is also their relationship with community partners such as the Boys & Girls Club. Salida Circus currently serves an estimated 650 youth per year in Chaffee County.

Salida Circus has the potential for commercialization

Salida Circus currently offers social circus training locally to all citizens of Chaffee County, aged four years and older at six weekly workshops, held at community centers and at the Salida Boys and Girls club. They hold two annual camps (summer and New Year) and three annual master classes for higher level participants. They also offer social circus training state and nation-wide through training videos, Skype seminars and practitioner training seminars in Salida.

Salida Circus business model for commercialization is to expand their social circus programs state-wide across Colorado and also develop a nation-wide “Salida Circus Membership” program to allow other organizations to develop social circus youth programs following their proven “*Circus with a Purpose*” business model. This will be achieved by offering social circus training products which will provide leadership training and build-your-own-circus kits to target organizations, including Boys and Girls clubs, HeadStart programs, public schools and after school programs and other low income support services groups.

Salida Circus fills a need in the marketplace

The combination of shifts in school programming and youth sports participation, increasing street violence, the rise of youth obesity, and economic pressures on families have resulted in at-risk behavior and unhealthy life styles. Financially-strapped public schools systems across the United States are cutting physical education and arts programs and even recess¹. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, there is a decline in youth sports, due to safety, cost and a generally threatening competitive environment for many children.

The Salida Circus approach holds high appeal for marginalized youth, pulling them into participation in a way that is non-threatening. It also appeals to youth who don't fit traditional competitive sports by providing a “low-cost-of-entry” activity that emphasizes self-esteem and personal best. It has broad appeal across ethnic groups, and is particularly well-suited to non-native speakers, refugees groups, and LGBT youth. According to the American Youth Circus Organization (AYCO) “State of the Circus Survey,” the appeal of social circus to the 18-34 audience is personal growth, followed by artistic expression and a creative outlet. According to the AYCO 2014 Survey², the majority of youths served come from house-holds with annual incomes of under \$25,000.

Childhood obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years (cdc.gov). Today more than one third of children and adolescents are considered overweight or obese (cdc.gov). Many factors contribute to this including diet, lack of structured physical activity, and the rise of sedentary activities. Research shows that US teens (13-18) are using entertainment or social media an average of nine hours per day, and tweens (8-12) an average of six hours per day³. Salida Circus' after school programs have been effective in promoting physical fitness in youth because circus is fun! Social circus training involves movement, flexibility, strength building and body awareness and as one young participant stated, joining the Salida Circus was “*my dream come true!*”

Listening to Jennifer talk about her passion and vision for her business growth was inspiring. I hope that you will grant her an opportunity to present at the national InnovateHER contest in DC.



Alison Brown, President, Salida Business Incubator

¹ <http://demosphere.com/2015/05/decline-of-youth-sports/>

² <http://circusnow.org/results-are-in-from-the-2014-state-of-circus-survey/>

³ <https://www.common sense media.org/about-us/news/press-releases/landmark-report-us-teens-use-an-average-of-nine-hours-of-media-per-day>