

## FOUNDER'S FAIRWELL

August 1, 2022

Dear Friends,

I learned of the Circus Project's imminent closure just hours before the public announcement. Like many of you, I am still digesting the news.

My relationship with the Circus Project shifted dramatically in 2018 when deteriorating health demanded that I discontinue, or at least pause, my dual roles as Artistic/Executive Director and Board Chair. Upon my return to the Board in 2020, I learned that the organization had diverged significantly from the artistic and administrative directions I established prior to my medical leave. The then-current leadership was determined to pursue an agenda arguably no better or worse than the one I envisioned, but one that no longer fully aligned with my values or interests.

Not yet well enough to resume the responsibilities required of a leadership role, but wise enough to recognize the futility of following a trajectory I could not wholly embrace, I resigned. It was not an easy choice, but one I believed necessary to allow both the organization and my own creative endeavors to evolve unconstrained. The beauty of art (and of life) is rooted in its openness to interpretation and its ability to branch in multiple directions.

I know little of what has transpired in the years since my departure, but I know this: I left the organization in the hands of good people with good intentions who tried their best. The willingness to risk failure and retribution is intrinsic to both leadership and creativity.

As the news settles, I'm flooded with feelings—frustration, gratitude, anger, grief, compassion. The strong emotions elicited by the Circus Project's announcement are indicative of the organization's impact. Our grief is a reflection of our love. Our anger is an expression of our passion for a project that will continue to seed new life through its death.

The Circus Project came to life in the dry and unforgiving dirt of 2008, when funding favored established organizations that provided basic services to big numbers. The idea of investing in an unknown entity that served less than ten students per year through intensive (and expensive) circus training was preposterous to most. Were it not for a few brave philanthropists, a formidable force of volunteers, a group of students willing to commit to themselves and the project, and an anonymous angel at Citibank Visa, the Circus Project would have withered before it bloomed.

Over the decade in which I had the honor to serve as a conduit for its collective dreaming, the Circus Project grew from a scrappy seedling into a towering tree. By 2018, the organization engaged over 1800 students and 50 employees per year with an annual revenue of just under \$1 million. Our unlikely rise sheltered fledgling dreams and nurtured new growth. We changed

countless lives and cultural landscapes, challenging ourselves and our communities to creatively address inequity and artistically embrace diversity.

Students of the Circus Project's early incarnation may recall an improvisation exercise passed on to me by Pochinko clown master Sue Morrison, in which the essence of a character is revealed through the way in which they say goodbye. We are made not by what we build or accomplish, but of what remains when everything has been stripped away. Through loss we gain insight into the truth of who we are.

I am well practiced at saying goodbye to the Circus Project. As the last of its tendrils loosen their grip, grief gives way to gratitude. I am left with profound appreciation for the community we created, and for those who carried the project when I could not: the artists who inspired continued innovation, the administrators who ensured ongoing operations; the funders who gifted the recognition and resources that enabled us to thrive; the volunteers who energized every aspect of the organization; and our students, whose courage, creativity, and commitment made Portland a better place, and whose affirmations and accusations made me a better person.

These are days of dissolution: the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly. Nothing is exempt. We don't decide what stays or what goes; we decide how to dance with forces beyond our control, and how we move determines our next direction. Circus teaches us when to hold on and when to let go, how to persevere through pain and rebound stronger; it teaches us how to hold ourselves while supporting one another, mindful of our unique role within the collective ensemble.

We flew, we fell, we will rise again. The show goes on. The Circus Project was groundbreaking in its inception and innovative in its approach. Its curtain call should be no different. Let's meet death dancing and fall as we flew: with courage, with grace, together...

with Love,

Jenn Cohen, Circus Project Founder  
Artistic/Executive Director & Board Chair, 2008 - 2018  
[jenn@jenncohencreative.com](mailto:jenn@jenncohencreative.com)

