



Breaking Circus: A Case Study on Community, Art, and Integration

October 2024 | Peopledvelopment.antigonish@gmail.com

Introduction: A Creative Entity and Art Space

Breaking Circus, based in Kjiptuktuk (Halifax), Nova Scotia, is not your typical arts entity. It serves as a catalyst for social change, cultural integration, and community health, offering circus as a form of artistic expression and, more importantly, as a way of fostering belonging and inclusion. As the founders explain: “Circus was our internet [in the past], bringing the world’s marvels to everyone’s doorstep. We started with a vision of creating art, but over time we’ve evolved into something much bigger—a community-driven movement. What we do here goes beyond circus—it’s about healing, finding community, and breaking barriers, not just physical ones. We don’t just teach circus arts—we teach life skills, confidence, resilience. Our mentorship program is designed to help people transform, both personally and professionally.”

This case study delves into how Breaking Circus, led by co-founders Dawn Shepherd and Ryan Gray, engages newcomers, employs a unique business model, and embodies values of inclusivity, collaboration, and trust, while influencing the changing cultural landscape of Nova Scotia.

Co-founder Dawn Shepherd succinctly sums up the organization’s mission: “Circus is an art form that makes the whole community healthier. It’s a place where everyone can be accepted, express themselves, and find meaning.” This ethos, deeply embedded in Breaking Circus’s work, demonstrates how arts-based initiatives can create vibrant, inclusive communities while addressing social and cultural needs.

Breaking Circus is more than a performance group. It is a community entity that offers a home to people of all backgrounds, some of whom are new to Canada or new to circus arts, offering them a space where they can feel included, learn, and thrive. At the core of their work is a belief that the socio-cultural dimensions of settlement are just as important as economic or logistical factors. A critical part of this process is the organization's ability to help people find their voice through artistic and cultural expression in a space where they feel a strong sense of belonging.

Engaging with Newcomers: Socio-Cultural Immersion Through the Arts.

Circus arts at Breaking Circus are a medium for integration, serving as a bridge between different cultures and communities. Their programs are designed to address the social, emotional, and cultural needs of newcomers, offering a platform for artistic expression, community engagement, and learning. For many participants, this is their first experience with circus arts, but through mentorship, workshops, and performance opportunities, they discover new abilities and potential.

Breaking Brave

One of Breaking Circus's most successful initiatives in fostering inclusion is the Breaking BRAVE Mentorship Program, which is specifically designed to support individuals from underrepresented and equity-deserving communities, including IBPOC (Indigenous, Black, People of Color), LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from underserved backgrounds. This program helps participants, including newcomers to Canada, access long-term opportunities in the circus arts while receiving mentorship, training, and financial support.

Participants from the Breaking BRAVE Mentorship Program reflect on how Breaking Circus has transformed their lives. Nithin Nedumparambil, a third-year computer science student at Dalhousie University, first encountered circus arts at a juggling workshop hosted by Breaking

Circus. Nithin, now a Chinese pole artist, admits that he would have never imagined himself participating in circus arts a year ago. "If someone told me I would be doing this a year ago, I would have thought they were crazy," he shares, highlighting how the program pushed him beyond self-imposed limits.

Esther Kisebo, a dancer, and student at St. Mary's University, found circus to be a demanding yet rewarding art form. She describes it as "the hardest thing I've ever done," explaining how the physical and mental challenges of circus arts pushed her to grow in ways she hadn't anticipated. For Esther and Nithin, the mentorship program opened a new world of possibilities, allowing them to explore creative potential they didn't realize they had.

"It's important for young people, especially from marginalized communities, to see themselves represented in the arts. That's what Breaking Circus is all about showing them they belong here."

Another mentee, Nathaniel Dooks, who comes from a breakdancing background, has found the mentorship program to be more than just skill-building. For him, it's also about community. He speaks of the strong bonds he



Diverse group of mentors and mentees in professional training program.

formed with his fellow mentees through hours of intense training. “We’ve become a tight-knit unit,” he explains. For Nathaniel, learning new skills, such as working with aerial apparatus, not only expanded his physical repertoire but also strengthened his sense of belonging within the circus community.

These reflections illustrate how Breaking Circus empowers individuals, particularly newcomers, to break through personal, social, and creative barriers. The Breaking BRAVE Mentorship Program addresses systemic inequalities in access to the arts by creating pathways for participants to develop as artists, leaders, and community members.

Community Building, Mentorship and Trust

Trust is central to the practice of circus arts, and it’s a value that Breaking Circus emphasizes at every level of engagement. Circus is a discipline where participants must trust one another with their safety, creating deep bonds that go beyond performance. This fundamental trust fosters personal growth, mutual reliance, and teamwork – capacities that are useful in all facets of life.

The Mentorship Program has played a significant role in building these bonds. Participants, who often come from underserved or marginalized backgrounds, not only receive technical training in circus arts but also develop life skills such as perseverance, dedication, and resilience. The mentorship program provides financial support in the form of stipends, which ensures that participants can fully commit to their training without financial hardship—a point that is crucial for equity-deserving individuals who might otherwise be unable to participate.

For many mentees, the mentorship extends far beyond circus skills. It’s about preparing them for leadership roles within the community, encouraging them to be ambassadors of inclusion and diversity within the arts. Through this program, mentees gain the confidence and tools they need to shape their futures, both in and out of the circus ring.



Free juggling workshops on the street are one way to introduce circus arts in a diverse community.

Ryan shared, “Reaching out to newcomers is about more than just getting them to participate. It’s about understanding their stories and giving them the space to express those stories through art. For example, it’s amazing to discover and learn how traditional practices like Mallakhamb from India connect with modern circus disciplines.”

Social Change through Social Circus

Breaking Circus’s artistic creations cover a wide range of themes and forms of expression under the canopy of circus arts. Their professional, modern circus productions have received high praise, have become anchor events for large festivals in Halifax, such as Nocturne, and have reached across the province and beyond. Many of their productions include social commentary on making our communities an inclusive and brave place where diversity and differences are acknowledged, understood, respected and celebrated. By engaging the diversity of the Nova Scotian population in creating productions, by striving to make productions accessible across the province and by working with themes that are relevant to the lives and struggles of diverse populations Breaking Circus encompasses some of the best ideas of the philosophy social-circus from other parts of the world.

Large Footprint, Hidden In Plain Sight

Although Breaking Circus is a relatively small organization, its impact extends far beyond its physical space in Halifax. Through year-round outreach programs, performances, and collaborations, Breaking Circus influences diverse communities across Nova Scotia and beyond. The organization has established deep connections with community partners and has created a large footprint by reaching underserved and equity-deserving populations.

Breaking Circus partners with organizations like the *Black Wellness Cooperative of Nova Scotia*, to help ensure that fitness and wellness programs are accessible to equity-deserving populations while integrating circus arts into broader community health initiatives. Through meaningful partnerships with local organizations who share a similar vision for inclusion and integration, Breaking Circus expands its reach beyond the circus ring to address the overall well-being of the community.

Another significant partnership is with the *Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial (CSAP)*, where Breaking Circus brings circus arts (in French) to Francophone/Acadian communities across the province. Most recently through this initiative, circus workshops were provided to students in six different communities across Cape Breton, engaging youth from all grades and introducing them to circus arts in a fun and inclusive environment. The presence of artists of color leading these workshops has been particularly meaningful for Francophone students, as it reflects the diverse cultural landscape of Nova Scotia.

Breaking Circus is committed to building meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities as another key element of their outreach. Through juggling workshops and physical play activities, Breaking Circus endeavours to create spaces for learning and cultural exchange. These efforts can contribute to a broader understanding of Indigenous worldviews by all participants and help newcomers build connections with the history and culture of the pluralistic society that is Canada.

Dawn speaks passionately about the mission of the organization, “We are the social organization of tomorrow today, pushing boundaries and fostering community health through the arts.”

The organization’s reach extends even further. Outreach performers are aware of the rich tradition of circus arts in other parts of the world, and specifically try to engage with newcomers from countries where circus and or physical arts has a long tradition (e.g. countries of Eastern Europe, India, Brazil, Korea etc.). Breaking Circus provides these newcomers with opportunities to continue their cultural practices, while also offering a space where they can connect with the broader Halifax community.

Sustainability is another pillar of Breaking Circus’s outreach work. The organization is committed to aligning its practices with the UN Sustainability Goals and uses tools such as Creative Green Tools to measure and minimize its environmental impact. This sustainability focus highlights Breaking Circus’s holistic approach to community well-being, ensuring that the organization’s activities benefit both people and the planet.



Creative, professionally staged performances demonstrate circus can be an educational tool, a livelihood and a lifestyle.

A Unique Business Model: Co-Structure of a Private Business and an Artists' Collective

Breaking Circus operates on a hybrid model that is as innovative as its approach to circus arts. It functions as both a private business and an artists' collective, blending traditional financial sustainability with a deep commitment to collective ownership and inclusivity. This model allows Breaking Circus to support its community-driven mission while ensuring that artists and participants have a say in the organization's operations.

Although it is technically a for-profit business, Breaking Circus reinvests all of its profits into its artists and space. As co-founder Dawn Shepherd explains, "We run as a social enterprise, not a traditional business. We measure success not by profit, but by the number of lives we impact." This approach ensures that financial gain is secondary to the organization's mission of community health, inclusivity, and artistic expression.

"Transforming this space was a labor of love and necessity, investing \$100,000 into making it a home for our art. Every dollar we earn goes back into sustaining the artists and the space, ensuring we can continue our mission. Our mentorship program is designed to remove barriers, providing stipends at a living wage, fostering diversity and inclusion."

The organization's multi-use space is a cornerstone of this model. Breaking Circus makes its space available to other community organizations at affordable rates. This space-sharing model fosters collaboration, ensuring that the studio remains accessible to families and groups who might otherwise struggle to find an affordable venue for arts and wellness programming.

For Joy Chiekwe, from the Black Wellness Cooperative, the flexibility of Breaking Circus's space is invaluable. "Their multi-use space is really helpful for us. It's a space we can use to facilitate our own programs," Joy explains,

emphasizing how the accessibility of the space enables her to engage families from diverse cultural backgrounds in creative activities.

Nikki Martin, another partner from the Black Wellness Cooperative, values the inclusive leadership that Breaking Circus demonstrates. Nikki reflects on how Breaking Circus builds relationships within the community, not simply for the sake of networking, but for long-term, meaningful collaboration. "They don't always leverage those relationships in the same way others might, but they focus on building confidence and skills for the future," she notes.

"Partnerships with organizations like the Black Wellness Cooperative are crucial for balancing our artistic and community missions," says Dawn.



Mentees commit to a rigorous training program in the Breaking Circus studio, customized to support the practice of circus arts.

This collective approach to decision-making and resource sharing is part of what makes Breaking Circus a model for other community-based arts organizations. It operates with a clear sense of purpose: to create opportunities for marginalized communities while fostering an inclusive, artist-driven environment.

Unusual Financial Arrangement

One of the hallmarks of Breaking Circus's success is its innovative financial model. By blending commercial revenue from performances and workshops with grant funding for community outreach and mentorship programs, Breaking Circus has found a way to remain financially sustainable while staying true to its mission.

Managing finances as a collective comes with its challenges, but Breaking Circus's commitment to reinvesting all profits into the organization ensures that the space remains a vibrant hub for both artists and the community. Last year's budget of approximately \$250,000 demonstrates the scalability of this model, as Breaking Circus continues to grow while maintaining its focus on inclusion and accessibility.

By operating as a social enterprise, Breaking Circus avoids the pitfalls of traditional non-profits, where decision-making can be bogged down by board structures. Instead, Breaking Circus allows artists to have a direct say in how resources are allocated, making it an agile and responsive organization that can adapt to the needs of its community.

The Future: Expanding Outreach and Sense of Belonging

Looking to the future, Breaking Circus has ambitious plans to expand its reach and deepen its impact. Dawn and Ryan are committed to increasing their engagement with newcomer communities, and historically marginalized Indigenous and Black communities. Their goal is to create even more inclusive programs that bridge cultural divides and foster a sense of belonging for all participants.

One of the ways Breaking Circus plans to achieve this is by working on larger public art projects that involve entire communities in the creative process. These projects will invite people to engage with circus as a form of cultural storytelling, expanding the organization's mission of making art accessible to everyone.

For Nikki Martin, the key to Breaking Circus's future success lies in their ability to stay true to their values. "They're building for the future, and that means they're not afraid to let go of funding that doesn't align with who they are," she observes, pointing out that Breaking Circus's commitment to its mission is what sets it apart from other organizations.

"The changes we're making aren't just for the short-term. We want to leave behind a legacy of inclusive and accessible arts for generations to come." Say Ryan and Dawn in unison.

Rapidly Changing Nova Scotia

Breaking Circus is more than an arts organization—it is a model for how socio-cultural initiatives can shape the settlement process for newcomers. As Nova Scotia continues to evolve due to increasing migration, both from other parts of Canada and abroad, organizations like Breaking Circus play a critical role in fostering belonging. Co-led by a multi-cultural, mixed-race group, Breaking Circus embodies the inclusive, supportive spaces that are necessary to help newcomers find their voice, express their artistic and cultural identities, and feel a sense of community.

This case story highlights why the socio-cultural dimensions of settlement are a critical part of the process. It's not just about housing or employment; it's about belonging—where people can discover their artistic and cultural expressions, find a space and community that welcomes them, and, ultimately, feel part of a place they can call home. In that process, Breaking Circus serves as a hidden yet indispensable force, creating deep-rooted impacts within the changing nature of the Nova Scotian community.